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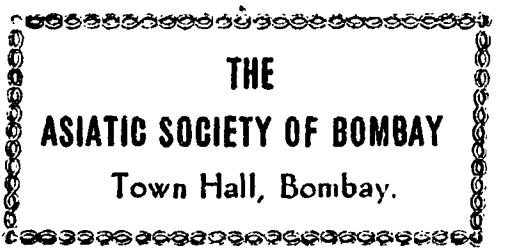

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POOR MISS FINCH.

A Novel.

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BY

WILKIE COLLINS,

AUTHOR OF

"THE WOMAN IN WHITE," "NO NAME," "MAN AND WIFE,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

76368

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TO

MRS. ELLIOT,

(OF THE DEANERY, BRISTOL).

WILL you honour me by accepting the Dedication of this book, in remembrance of an uninterrupted friendship of many years?

More than one charming blind girl, in fiction and in the drama, has preceded "Poor Miss Finch." But, so far as I know, blindness in these cases has been always exhibited, more or less exclusively, from the ideal and the sentimental point of view. The attempt here made is to appeal to an interest of another kind, by exhibiting blindness as it

really is. I have carefully gathered the information necessary to the execution of this purpose from competent authorities of all sorts. Whenever "Lucilla" acts or speaks in these pages, with reference to her blindness, she is doing or saying what persons afflicted as she is have done or said before her. Of the other features which I have added to produce and sustain interest in this central personage of my story, it does not become me to speak. It is for my readers to say if "Lucilla" has found her way to their sympathies. In this character, and more especially again in the characters of "Nugent Dubourg" and "Madame Pratolungo," I have tried to present human nature in its inherent inconsistencies and self-contradictions—in its intricate mixture of good and evil, of great and small—as I see it in the world about me. But the faculty of observing character is so rare, the curiously mistaken tendency to look

for logical consistency in human motives and human actions is so general, that I may possibly find the execution of this part of my task misunderstood — sometimes even resented — in certain quarters. However, Time has stood my friend in relation to other characters of mine in other books— and who can say that Time may not help me again here? Perhaps, one of these days, I may be able to make use of some of the many interesting stories of events that have really happened, which have been placed in my hands by persons who could speak as witnesses to the truth of the narrative. Thus far, I have not ventured to disturb the repose of these manuscripts in the locked drawer allotted to them. The true incidents are so "far-fetched;" and the conduct of the real people is so "grossly improbable!"

As for the object which I have had in

view in writing this story, it is I hope plain enough to speak for itself. I subscribe to the article of belief which declares, that the conditions of human happiness are independent of bodily affliction, and that it is even possible for bodily affliction itself to take its place among the ingredients of happiness. These are the views which "Poor Miss Finch" is intended to advocate—and this is the impression which I hope to leave on the mind of the reader when the book is closed.

W. C.

January 16th, 1872.

CONTENTS OF VOL. I.

PART THE FIRST.

PAGE

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

MADAME PRATOLUNGO PRESENTS HERSELF . . 1

CHAPTER THE SECOND.

MADAME PRATOLUNGO MAKES A VOYAGE ON LAND . 10

CHAPTER THE THIRD.

POOR MISS FINCH 20

CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

TWILIGHT VIEW OF THE MAN 35

CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

CANDLELIGHT VIEW OF THE MAN . . . 47

CHAPTER THE SIXTH.

A CAGE OF FINCHES 60

PAGE

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH.

DAYLIGHT VIEW OF THE MAN 74

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH.

THE PERJURY OF THE CLOCK. 88

CHAPTER THE NINTH.

THE HERO OF THE TRIAL 102

CHAPTER THE TENTH.

FIRST APPEARANCE OF JICKS 113

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH.

BLIND LOVE 124

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH.

MR. FINCH SMELLS MONEY 140

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH.

SECOND APPEARANCE OF JICKS . . . 156

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH.

DISCOVERIES AT BROWNDOWN 164

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH.

EVENTS AT THE BEDSIDE 177

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH.

FIRST RESULT OF THE ROBBERY . . . 187

PAGE

CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH.

THE DOCTOR'S OPINION 200

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH.

FAMILY TROUBLES 208

CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH.

SECOND RESULT OF THE ROBBERY . . . 222

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH.

GOOD PAPA AGAIN ! 243

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST.

MADAME PRATOLUNGO RETURNS TO DIMCHURCH . 256

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND.

THE TWIN-BROTHER'S LETTER 264

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD.

HE SETS US ALL RIGHT 280

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH.

HE SEES LUCILLA 300

PART THE FIRST.

POOR MISS FINCH.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

MADAME PRATOLUNGO PRESENTS HERSELF.

YOU are here invited to read the story of an Event which occurred in an out-of-the-way corner of England, some years since.

The persons principally concerned in the Event are:—a blind girl; two (twin) brothers; a skilled surgeon; and a curious foreign woman. I am the curious foreign woman. And I take it on myself—for reasons which will presently appear—to tell the story.

So far we understand each other. Good. I may make myself known to you as briefly as I can.

I am Madame Pratolungo—widow of that celebrated South American patriot, Doctor Pratolungo. I am French by birth. Before I married the Doctor, I went through many vicissitudes in my own country. They ended in leaving me (at an age which is of no consequence to anybody) with some experience of the world; with a cultivated musical talent on the pianoforte; and with a comfortable little fortune unexpectedly bequeathed to me by a relative of my dear dead mother (which fortune I shared with good Papa and with my younger sisters). To these qualifications I added another, the most precious of all, when I married the Doctor; namely — a strong infusion of ultra-liberal principles. *Vive la Republique!*

Some people do one thing, and some do another, in the way of celebrating the event of their marriage. Having become man and wife, Doctor Pratolungo and I took ship to Central America—and devoted our honeymoon, in those disturbed districts, to the sacred duty of destroying tyrants.

Ah! the vital air of my noble husband was the air of revolutions. From his youth up-

wards he had followed the glorious profession of Patriot. Wherever the people of the Southern New World rose and declared their independence—and, in my time, that fervent population did nothing else—there was the Doctor self-devoted on the altar of his adopted country. He had been fifteen times exiled, and condemned to death in his absence, when I met with him in Paris—the picture of heroic poverty, with a brown complexion and one lame leg. Who could avoid falling in love with such a man? I was proud when he proposed to devote me on the altar of his adopted country, as well as himself—me, and my money. For, alas! everything is expensive in this world; including the destruction of tyrants and the saving of Freedom. All my money went in helping the sacred cause of the people. Dictators and filibusters flourished in spite of us. Before we had been a year married, the Doctor had to fly (for the sixteenth time) to escape being tried for his life. My husband condemned to death in his absence; and I with my pockets empty. This is how the Republic rewarded us. And yet, I love the Republic.

Ah, you monarchy-people, sitting fat and contented under tyrants, respect that!

This time, we took refuge in England. The affairs of Central America went on without us.

I thought of giving lessons in music. But my glorious husband could not spare me away from him. I suppose we should have starved, and made a sad little paragraph in the English newspapers—if the end had not come in another way. My poor Pratolungo was in truth worn out. He sank under his sixteenth exile. I was left a widow—with nothing but the inheritance of my husband's noble sentiments to console me.

I went back for awhile to good Papa and my sisters in Paris. But it was not in my nature to remain, and be a burden on them at home. I returned again to London, with recommendations; and encountered inconceivable disasters in the effort to earn a living honourably. Of all the wealth about me—the prodigal, insolent, ostentatious wealth—none fell to my share. What right has anybody to be rich? I defy you, whoever you may be, to prove that anybody has a right to be rich.

Without dwelling on my disasters, let it be enough to say that I got up one morning, with three pounds, seven shillings, and fourpence in my purse; with my fervid temper, and my republican principles—and with absolutely nothing in prospect, that is to say with not a halfpenny more to come to me, unless I could earn it for myself.

In this sad case, what does an honest woman who is bent on winning her own independence by her own work, do? She takes three and sixpence out of her little humble store; and she advertises herself in a newspaper.

One always advertises the best side of oneself. (Ah, poor humanity!) My best side was my musical side. In the days of my vicissitudes (before my marriage) I had at one time had a share in a millinery establishment in Lyons. At another time, I had been bedchamber woman to a great lady in Paris. But in my present situation, these sides of myself were, for various reasons, not so presentable as the pianoforte side. I was not a great player—far from it. But I had been soundly instructed; and I had, what you call,

a competent skill on the instrument. Brief, I made the best of myself, I promise you, in my advertisement.

The next day, I borrowed the newspaper, to enjoy the pride of seeing my composition in print.

Ah, heaven! what did I discover? I discovered what other wretched advertising people have found out before me. Above my own advertisement, the very thing I wanted was advertised for by somebody else! Look in any newspaper; and you will see strangers who (if I may so express myself) exactly fit each other, advertising for each other, without knowing it. I had advertised myself as "accomplished musical companion for a lady. With cheerful temper to match." And there above me was my unknown necessitous fellow-creature, crying out in printers' types:— "Wanted, a companion for a lady. Must be an accomplished musician, and have a cheerful temper. Testimonials to capacity, and first-rate references required." Exactly what I had offered! "Apply by letter only, in the first instance." Exactly what I had said! Fie upon me, I had spent three and sixpence

for nothing. I threw down the newspaper, in a transport of anger (like a fool)—and then took it up again (like a sensible woman), and applied by letter for the offered place.

My letter brought me into contact with a lawyer. The lawyer enveloped himself in mystery. It seemed to be a professional habit with him to tell nobody anything, if he could possibly help it.

Drop by drop, this wearisome man let the circumstances out. The lady was a young lady. She was the daughter of a clergyman. She lived in a retired part of the country. More even than that, she lived in a retired part of the house. Her father had married a second time. Having only the young lady as child by his first marriage, he had (I suppose by way of a change) a large family by his second marriage. Circumstances rendered it necessary for the young lady to live as much apart as she could from the tumult of a house-ful of children. So he went on, until there was no keeping it in any longer—and then he let it out. The young lady was blind!

Young—lonely—blind. I had a sudden inspiration. I felt I should love her.

The question of my musical capacity was, in this sad case, a serious one. The poor young lady had one great pleasure to illumine her dark life—Music. Her companion was wanted to play from the book, and play worthily, the works of the great masters (whom this young creature adored)—and she, listening, would take her place next at the piano, and reproduce the music morsel by morsel, by ear. A professor was appointed to pronounce sentence on me, and declare if I could be trusted not to misinterpret Mozart, Beethoven, and the other masters who have written for the piano. Through this ordeal I passed with success. As for my references, they spoke for themselves. Not even the lawyer (though he tried hard) could pick holes in them. It was arranged on both sides that I should, in the first instance, go on a month's visit to the young lady. If we both wished it at the end of the time, I was to stay, on terms arranged to my perfect satisfaction. There was our treaty!

The next day I started for my visit by the railway.

My instructions directed me to travel to

the town of Lewes in Sussex. Arrived there, I was to ask for the pony-chaise of my young lady's father—described on his card as Reverend Tertius Finch. The chaise was to take me to the rectory house in the village of Dimchurch. And the village of Dimchurch was situated among the South Down Hills, three or four miles from the coast.

When I stepped into the railway carriage, this was all I knew. After my adventurous life—after the volcanic agitations of my republican career in the Doctor's time—was I about to bury myself in a remote English village, and live a life as monotonous as the life of a sheep on a hill? Ah, with all my experience, I had yet to learn that the narrowest human limits are wide enough to contain the grandest human emotions. I had seen the Drama of Life amid the turmoil of tropical revolutions. I was to see it again, with all its palpitating interest, in the breezy solitudes of the South Down Hills.

CHAPTER THE SECOND.

MADAME PRATOLUNGO MAKES A VOYAGE ON LAND.

A WELL-FED boy, with yellow Saxon hair; a little shabby green chaise; and a rough brown pony —these objects confronted me at the Lewes Station. I said to the boy, "Are you Reverend Finch's servant?" And the boy answered, "I be he."

We drove through the town—a hilly town of desolate clean houses. No living creatures visible behind the jealously-shut windows. No living creatures entering or departing through the sad-coloured closed doors. No theatre; no place of amusement except an empty town-hall, with a sad policeman meditating on its spruce white steps. No

customers in the shops, and nobody to serve them behind the counter, even if they had turned up. Here and there on the pavements, an inhabitant with a capacity for staring, and (apparently) a capacity for nothing else. I said to Reverend Finch's boy, "Is this a rich place?" Reverend Finch's boy brightened and answered, "That it be!" Good. At any rate, they don't enjoy themselves here—the infamous rich!

Leaving this town of unamused citizens immured in domestic tombs, we got on a fine high road—still ascending—with a spacious open country on either side of it.

A spacious open country is a country soon exhausted by a sight-seer's eye. I have learnt from my poor Pratolungo the habit of searching for the political convictions of my fellow-creatures, when I find myself in contact with them in strange places. Having nothing else to do, I searched Finch's boy. His political programme, I found to be:—As much meat and beer as I can contain; and as little work to do for it as possible. In return for this, to touch my hat when I meet the Squire, and to be content with the station to

which it has pleased God to call me. Miserable Finch's boy!

We reached the highest point of the road. On our right hand, the ground sloped away gently into a fertile valley—with a village and a church in it; and beyond, an abominable privileged enclosure of grass and trees torn from the community by a tyrant, and called a Park; with the palace in which this enemy of mankind caroused and fattened, standing in the midst. On our left hand, spread the open country—a magnificent prospect of grand grassy hills, rolling away to the horizon; bounded only by the sky. To my surprise, Finch's boy descended; took the pony by the head; and deliberately led him off the high road, and on to the wilderness of grassy hills, on which not so much as a footpath was discernible anywhere, far or near. The chaise began to heave and roll like a ship on the sea. It became necessary to hold with both hands to keep my place. I thought first of my luggage—then of myself.

"How much is there of this?" I asked.

"Three mile on't," answered Finch's boy.

I insisted on stopping the ship—I mean the chaise—and on getting out. We tied my luggage fast with a rope; and then we went on again, the boy at the pony's head, and I after them on foot.

Ah, what a walk it was! What air over my head; what grass under my feet! The sweetness of the inner land, and the crisp saltness of the distant sea, were mixed in that delicious breeze. The short turf, fragrant with odorous herbs, rose and fell elastic, underfoot. The mountain-piles of white cloud moved in sublime procession along the blue field of heaven, overhead. The wild growth of prickly bushes, spread in great patches over the grass, was in a glory of yellow bloom. On we went; now up, now down; now bending to the right, and now turning to the left. I looked about me. No house; no road; no paths, fences, hedges, walls; no land-marks of any sort. All round us, turn which way we might, nothing was to be seen but the majestic solitude of the hills. No living creatures appeared but the white dots of sheep scattered over the soft green distance, and the skylark singing his hymn of

happiness, a speck above my head. Truly a wonderful place! Distant not more than a morning's drive from noisy and populous Brighton—a stranger to this neighbourhood could only have found his way by the compass, exactly as if he had been sailing on the sea! The farther we penetrated on our land-voyage, the more wild and the more beautiful the solitary landscape grew. The boy picked his way as he chose—there were no barriers here. Plodding behind, I saw nothing, at one time, but the back of the chaise, tilted up in the air, both boy and pony being invisibly buried in the steep descent of the hill. At other times, the pitch was all the contrary way; the whole interior of the ascending chaise was disclosed to my view, and above the chaise the pony, and above the pony the boy—and, ah, my luggage swaying and rocking in the frail embraces of the rope that held it. Twenty times did I confidently expect to see baggage, chaise, pony, boy, all rolling down into the bottom of a valley together. But no! Not the least little accident happened to spoil my enjoyment of [illegible]. Politically contemptible, Finch's boy [illegible]

merit—he was master of his subject as guide and pony-leader among the South Down Hills.

Arrived at the top of (as it seemed to me) our fiftieth grassy summit, I began to look about for signs of the village.

Behind me, rolled back the long undulations of the hills, with the cloud-shadows moving over the solitudes that we had left. Before me, at a break in the purple distance, I saw the soft white line of the sea. Beneath me, at my feet, opened the deepest valley I had noticed yet—with one first sign of the presence of Man scored hideously on the face of Nature, in the shape of a square brown patch of cleared and ploughed land on the grassy slope. I asked if we were getting near the village now. Finch's boy winked, and answered, "Yes, we be."

Astonishing Finch's boy! Ask him what questions I might, the resources of his vocabulary remained invariably the same. Still this youthful Oracle answered always in three monosyllabic words!

We plunged into the valley.

Arrived at the bottom, I discovered another sign of Man. Behold the first road I had

seen yet—a rough waggon-road ploughed deep in the chalky soil! We crossed this, and turned a corner of a hill. More signs of human life. Two small boys started up out of a ditch—apparently posted as scouts to give notice of our approach. They yelled, and set off running before us, by some short cut, known only to themselves. We turned again, round another winding of the valley, and crossed a brook. I considered it my duty to make myself acquainted with the local names. What was the brook called? It was called "The Cockshoot!" And the great hill, here, on my right? It was called "The Overblow!" Five minutes more, and we saw our first house—lonely and little—built of mortar and flint from the hills. A name to this also? Certainly! Name of "Browndown." Another ten minutes of walking, involving us more and more deeply in the mysterious green windings of the valley—and the great event of the day happened at last. Finch's boy pointed before him with his whip, and said (even at this supreme moment, still in three monosyllabic words) :—

"Here we be!"

So this is Dimchurch! I shake out the chalk-dust from the skirts of my dress. I long (quite vainly) for the least bit of looking-glass to see myself in. Here is the population (to the number of at least five or six), gathered together, informed by the scouts—and it is my woman's business to produce the best impression of myself that I can. We advance along the little road. I smile upon the population. The population stares at me in return. On one side, I remark three or four cottages, and a bit of open ground; also an inn named "The Cross-Hands," and a bit more of open ground; also a tiny, tiny butcher's-shop, with sanguinary insides of sheep on one blue pie-dish in the window, and no other meat than that, and nothing to see beyond, but again the open ground, and again the hills; indicating the end of the village on this side. On the other side there appears, for some distance, nothing but a long flint wall guarding the outhouses of a farm. Beyond this, comes another little group of cottages, with the seal of civilisation set on them, in the form of a post-office. The post-

office deals in general commodities—in boots and bacon, biscuits and flannel, crinoline petticoats and religious tracts. Farther on, behold another flint wall, a garden, and a private dwelling-house; proclaiming itself as the rectory. Farther yet, on rising ground, a little desolate church, with a tiny white circular steeple, topped by an extinguisher in red tiles. Beyond this, the hills and the heavens once more. And there is Dimchurch!

As for the inhabitants—what am I to say? I suppose I must tell the truth.

I remarked one born gentleman among the inhabitants, and he was a sheep-dog. He alone did the honours of the place. He had a stump of a tail, which he wagged at me with extreme difficulty, and a good honest white and black face which he poked companionably into my hand. "Welcome, Madame Pratolungo, to Dimchurch; and excuse these male and female labourers who stand and stare at you. The good God who makes us all has made them too, but has not succeeded so well as with you and me." I happen to be one of the few people who can read dogs' langu[illegible]

as written in dogs' faces. I correctly report the language of the gentleman sheep-dog on this occasion.

We opened the gate of the rectory, and passed in. So my Land-Voyage over the South Down Hills came prosperously to its end.

CHAPTER THE THIRD.

POOR MISS FINCH.

THE rectory resembled, in one respect, this narrative that I am now writing. It was in Two Parts. Part the First, in front, composed of the everlasting flint and mortar of the neighbourhood, failed to interest me. Part the Second, running back at a right angle, asserted itself as ancient. It had been, in its time, as I afterwards heard, a convent of nuns. Here were snug little Gothic windows, and dark ivy-covered walls of venerable stone repaired in places, at some past period, with quaint red bricks. I had hoped that I should enter the house by this side of it. But no. The boy—after appearing to be at a loss what to do with me—led the way to a door on the

modern side of the building, and rang the bell.

A slovenly young maid-servant admitted me to the house.

Possibly, this person was new to the duty of receiving visitors. Possibly, she was bewildered by a sudden invasion of children in dirty frocks, darting out on us in the hall, and then darting back again into invisible back regions, screeching at the sight of a stranger. At any rate, she too appeared to be at a loss what to do with me. After staring hard at my foreign face, she suddenly opened a door in the wall of the passage, and admitted me into a small room. Two more children in dirty frocks darted, screaming, out of the asylum thus offered to me. I mentioned my name, as soon as I could make myself heard. The maid appeared to be terrified at the length of it. I gave her my card. The maid took it between a dirty finger and thumb—looked at it as if it was some extraordinary natural curiosity—turned it round, exhibiting correct black impressions in various parts of it of her finger and thumb—gave up understanding it in despair, and left the room.

She was stopped outside (as I gathered from the sounds) by a returning invasion of children in the hall. There was whispering; there was giggling; there was, every now and then, a loud thump on the door. Prompted by the children, as I suppose—pushed in by them, certainly—the maid suddenly reappeared with a jerk, "Oh, if you please, come this way," she said. The invasion of children retreated again up the stairs—one of them in possession of my card, and waving it in triumph on the first landing. We penetrated to the other end of the passage. Again, a door was opened. Unannounced, I entered another, and a larger room. What did I see?

Fortune had favoured me at last. My lucky star had led me to the mistress of the house.

I made my best curtsey, and found myself confronting a large, light-haired, languid, lymphatic lady—who had evidently been amusing herself by walking up and down the room, at the moment when I appeared. If there can be such a thing as a *damp woman*—this was one. There was a humid shine on her colourless white face, and an overflow of wa[illegible]

her pale blue eyes. Her hair was not dressed; and her lace cap was all on one side. The upper part of her was clothed in a loose jacket of blue merino; the lower part was robed in a dimity dressing gown of doubtful white. In one hand, she held a dirty dogs'-eared book, which I at once detected to be a Circulating Library novel. Her other hand supported a baby enveloped in flannel, sucking at her breast. Such was my first experience of Reverend Finch's Wife—destined to be also the experience of all after-time. Never completely dressed; never completely dry; always with a baby in one hand and a novel in the other—such was Finch's wife.

"Oh? Madame Pratolungo? Yes. I hope somebody has told Miss Finch you are here. She has her own establishment, and manages everything herself. Have you had a pleasant journey?" (These words were spoken vacantly, as if her mind was occupied with something else. My first impression of her suggested that she was a weak good-natured woman, and that she must have originally occupied a station in the humbler ranks of life.)

"Thank you, Mrs. Finch," I said. "I have enjoyed most heartily my journey among your beautiful hills."

"Oh? you like the hills? Excuse my dress. I was half an hour late this morning. When you lose half an hour in this house, you never *can* pick it up again, try how you may." (I soon discovered that Mrs. Finch was always losing half an hour out of her day, and that she never, by any chance, succeeded in finding it again, as she had just told me.)

"I understand, madam. The cares of a numerous family——"

"Ah! that's just where it is." (This was a favourite phrase with Mrs. Finch). "There's Finch, he gets up in the morning and goes and works in the garden. Then there's the washing of the children; and the dreadful waste that goes on in the kitchen. And Finch, he comes in without any notice, and wants his breakfast. And of course I can't leave the baby. And half an hour does slip away so easily, that how to overtake it again, I do assure you I really don't know." Here the baby began to exhibit symptoms of having taken more maternal nourishment than his

infant stomach could comfortably contain. I held the novel, while Mrs. Finch searched for her handkerchief—first in her bedgown pocket; secondly, here, there, and everywhere in the room.

At this interesting moment there was a knock at the door. An elderly woman appeared—who offered a most refreshing contrast to the members of the household with whom I had made acquaintance thus far. She was neatly dressed; and she saluted me with the polite composure of a civilised being.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. My young lady has only this moment heard of your arrival. Will you be so kind as to follow me?"

I turned to Mrs. Finch. She had found her handkerchief, and had put her overflowing baby to rights again. I respectfully handed back the novel. "Thank you," said Mrs. Finch. "I find novels compose my mind. Do you read novels too? Remind me—and I'll lend you this one to-morrow." I expressed my acknowledgments, and withdrew. At the door, I looked round, saluting the lady of the house. Mrs. Finch was promenading

the room, with the baby in one hand and the novel in the other, and the dimity bedgown trailing behind her.

We ascended the stairs, and entered a bare white-washed passage, with drab-coloured doors in it, leading, as I presumed, into the sleeping chambers of the house.

Every door opened as we passed; children peeped out at me, screamed at me, and banged the door to again. "What family has the present Mrs. Finch?" I asked. The decent elderly woman was obliged to stop, and consider. "Including the baby, ma'am, and two sets of twins, and one seven months' child of deficient intellect—fourteen in all." Hearing this, I began—though I consider priests, kings, and capitalists to be the enemies of the human race—to feel a certain exceptional interest in Reverend Finch. Did he never wish that he had been a priest of the Roman Catholic Church, mercifully forbidden to marry at all? While the question passed through my mind, my guide took out a key, and opened a heavy oaken door at the further end of the passage.

"We are obliged to keep the door locked,

ma'am," she explained, "or the children would be in and out of our part of the house all day long."

After my experience of the children, I own I looked at the oaken door with mingled sentiments of gratitude and respect.

We turned a corner, and found ourselves in the vaulted corridor of the ancient portion of the house.

The casement windows, on one side—sunk deep in recesses—looked into the garden. Each recess was filled with groups of flowers in pots. On the other side, the old wall was gaily decorated with hangings of bright chintz. The doors were coloured of a creamy white, with gilt mouldings. The brightly ornamented matting under our feet I at once recognised as of South American origin. The ceiling above was decorated in delicate pale blue, with borderings of flowers. Nowhere down the whole extent of the place was so much as a single morsel of dark colour to be seen anywhere.

At the lower end of the corridor, a solitary figure in a pure white robe was bending over the flowers in the window. This was the

blind girl whose dark hours I had come to cheer. In the scattered villages of the South Downs, the simple people added their word of pity to her name, and called her compassionately—"Poor Miss Finch." As for me, I can only think of her by her pretty Christian name. She is "Lucilla" when my memory dwells on her. Let me call her "Lucilla" here.

When my eyes first rested on her, she was picking off the dead leaves from her flowers. Her delicate ear detected the sound of my strange footstep, long before I reached the place at which she was standing. She lifted her head—and advanced quickly to meet me with a faint flush on her face which came and died away again in a moment. I happen to have visited the picture gallery at Dresden in former years. As she approached me, nearer and nearer, I was irresistibly reminded of the gem of that superb collection—the matchless Virgin of Raphael, called "The Madonna di San Sisto." The fair broad forehead; the peculiar fulness of the flesh between the eyebrow and the eyelid; the delicate outline of the lower face; the tender,

sensitive lips; the colour of the complexion and the hair—all reflected, with a startling fidelity, the lovely creature of the Dresden picture. The one fatal point at which the resemblance ceased, was in the eyes. The divinely-beautiful eyes of Raphael's Virgin, were lost in the living likeness of her that confronted me now. There was no deformity; there was nothing to recoil from, in my blind Lucilla. The poor, dim, sightless eyes had a faded, changeless, inexpressive look—and that was all. Above them, below them, round them to the very edges of her eyelids, there was beauty, movement, life. *In* them—death! A more charming creature—with that one sad drawback—I never saw. There was no other personal defect in her. She had the fine height, the well-balanced figure, and the length of the lower limbs, which make all a woman's movements graceful of themselves. Her voice was delicious—clear, cheerful, sympathetic. This, and her smile—which added a charm of its own to the beauty of her mouth—won my heart, before she had got close enough to me to put her hand in mine. "Ah, my dear!" I said, in my headlong way,

"I am so glad to see you!" The instant the words passed my lips, I could have cut my tongue out for reminding her in that brutal manner, that she was blind.

To my relief, she showed no sign of feeling it as I did. "May I see you, in *my* way?" she asked gently—and held up her pretty white hand. "May I touch your face?"

I sat down at once on the window-seat. The soft rosy tips of her fingers seemed to cover my whole face in an instant. Three separate times she passed her hand rapidly over me; her own face absorbed all the while in breathless attention to what she was about. "Speak again!" she said suddenly, holding her hand over me in suspense. I said a few words. She stopped me by a kiss. "No more!" she exclaimed joyously. "Your voice says to my ears, what your face says to my fingers. I know I shall like you. Come in, and see the rooms we are going to live in together."

As I rose, she put her arm round my waist —then instantly drew it away again, and shook her fingers impatiently, as if something had hurt them.

"A pin?" I asked.

"No! no! What coloured dress have you got on?"

"Purple."

"Ah! I knew it! Pray don't wear dark colours. I have my own blind horror of anything that is dark. Dear Madame Pratolungo, wear pretty bright colours, to please *me!*" She put her arm caressingly round me again—round my neck, however, this time, where her hand could rest on my linen collar. "You will change your dress before dinner—won't you?" she whispered. "Let me unpack for you, and choose which dress I like."

The brilliant decorations of the corridor were explained to me now!

We entered the rooms; her bed-room, my bed-room, and our sitting-room between the two. I was prepared to find them, what they proved to be—as bright as looking-glasses, and gilding, and gaily-coloured ornaments, and cheerful knick-knacks of all sorts could make them. They were more like rooms in my lively native country than rooms in sober colourless England. The one thing which I

own did still astonish me, was that all this sparkling beauty of adornment in Lucilla's habitation should have been provided for the express gratification of a young lady who could not see. Experience was yet to show me that the blind can live in their imaginations, and have their favourite fancies and illusions like the rest of us.

To satisfy Lucilla by changing my dark purple dress, it was necessary that I should first have my boxes. So far as I knew, Finch's boy had taken my luggage, along with the pony, to the stables. Before Lucilla could ring the bell to make inquiries, my elderly guide (who had silently left us while we were talking together in the corridor) reappeared, followed by the boy and a groom, carrying my things. These servants also brought with them certain parcels for their young mistress, purchased in the town, together with a bottle, wrapped in fair white paper, which looked like a bottle of medicine —and which had a part of its own to play in our proceedings, later in the day.

"This is my old nurse," said Lucilla, presenting her attendant to me. "Zillah can d

a little of everything—cooking included. She has had lessons at a London Club. You must like Zillah, Madame Pratolungo, for my sake. Are your boxes open?"

She went down on her knees before the boxes, as she asked the question. No girl with the full use of her eyes could have enjoyed more thoroughly than she did the trivial amusement of unpacking my clothes. This time, however, her wonderful delicacy of touch proved to be at fault. Of two dresses of mine which happened to be exactly the same in texture, though widely different in colour, she picked out the dark dress as being the light one. I saw that I disappointed her sadly when I told her of her mistake. The next guess she made, however, restored the tips of her fingers to their place in her estimation: she discovered the stripes in a smart pair of stockings of mine, and brightened up directly. "Don't be long dressing," she said, on leaving me. "We shall have dinner in half an hour. French dishes, in honour of your arrival. I like a nice dinner—I am what you call in your country, *gourmande.* See the sad consequence!" She put one

finger to her pretty chin. "I am getting fat! I am threatened with a double chin—at two and twenty. Shocking! shocking!"

So she left me. And such was the first impression produced on my mind by "Poor Miss Finch."

CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

TWILIGHT VIEW OF THE MAN.

OUR nice dinner had long since come to an end. We had chattered, chattered, chattered—as usual with women—all about ourselves. The day had declined; the setting sun was pouring its last red lustre into our pretty sitting-room—when Lucilla started as if she had suddenly remembered something, and rang the bell.

Zillah came in. "The bottle from the chemist's," said Lucilla. "I ought to have remembered it, hours ago."

"Are you going to take it to Susan yourself, my dear?"

I was glad to hear the old nurse address her young lady in that familiar way. It was

so thoroughly un-English. Down with the devilish system of separation between the classes in this country — that is what I say!

"Yes; I am going to take it to Susan myself."

"Shall I go with you?"

"No, no. Not the least occasion." She turned to me. "I suppose you are too tired to go out again, after your walk on the hills?" she said.

I had dined; I had rested; I was quite ready to go out again, and I said so.

Lucilla's face brightened. For some reason of her own, she had apparently attached a certain importance to persuading me to go out with her.

"It's only a visit to a poor rheumatic woman in the village," she said. "I have got an embrocation for her; and I can't very well send it. She is old and obstinate. If I take it to her, she will believe in the remedy. If anybody else takes it, she will throw it away. I had utterly forgotten her, in the interest of our nice long talk. Shall we get ready?"

I had hardly closed the door of my bedroom when there was a knock at it. Lucilla? No: the old nurse entering on tiptoe, with a face of mystery, and a finger confidentially placed on her lips.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," she began in a whisper. "I think you ought to know that my young lady has a purpose in taking you out with her this evening. She is burning with curiosity—like all the rest of us for that matter. She took *me* out, and used *my* eyes to see with yesterday evening; and they have not satisfied her. She is going to try your eyes, now."

"What is Miss Lucilla so curious about?" I inquired.

"It's natural enough, poor dear," pursued the old woman, following her own train of thought, without the slightest reference to my question. "We none of us can find out anything about him. He usually takes his walk at twilight. You are pretty sure to meet him to-night; and you will judge for yourself, ma'am—with an innocent young creature like Miss Lucilla—what it may be best to do?"

This extraordinary answer set *my* curiosity in a flame.

"My good creature!" I said, "you forget that I am a stranger! I know nothing about it. Has this mysterious man got a name? Who is 'He'?"

As I said that, there was another knock at the door. Zillah whispered, eagerly, "Don't tell upon me, ma'am! You will see for yourself. I only speak for my young lady's good." She hobbled away, and opened the door—and there was Lucilla, with her smart garden hat on, waiting for me.

We went out by our own door into the garden, and passing through a gate in the wall, entered the village.

After the caution which the nurse had given me, it was impossible to ask any questions, except at the risk of making mischief in our little household, on the first day of my joining it. I kept my eyes wide open, and waited for events. I also committed a blunder at starting—I offered Lucilla my hand to lead her. She burst out laughing.

"My dear Madame Prätolungo! I know my way better than you do. I roam all over

the neighbourhood, with nothing to help me but this."

She held up a smart ivory walking-cane, with a bright silk tassel attached. With her cane in one hand, and her chemical bottle in the other—and her roguish little hat on the top of her head—she made the quaintest and prettiest picture I had seen for many a long day. "*You* shall guide *me*, my dear," I said—and took her arm. We went on down the village.

Nothing in the least like a mysterious figure passed us in the twilight. The few scattered labouring people, whom I had already seen, I saw again—and that was all. Lucilla was silent—suspiciously silent as I thought, after what Zillah had told me. She had, as I fancied, the look of a person who was listening intently. Arrived at the cottage of the rheumatic woman, she stopped and went in, while I waited outside. The affair of the embrocation was soon over. She was out again in a minute—and this time, she took my arm of her own accord.

"Shall we go a little farther?" she said. "It is so nice and cool at this hour of the evening."

Her object in view, whatever it might be, was evidently an object that lay beyond the village. In the solemn, peaceful twilight we followed the lonely windings of the valley along which I had passed in the morning. When we came opposite the little solitary house, which I had already learnt to know as "Browndown," I felt her hand unconsciously tighten on my arm. "Aha!" I said to myself. "Has Browndown anything to do with this?"

"Does the view look very lonely to-night?" she asked, waving her cane over the scene before us.

The true meaning of that question I took to be, "Do you see anybody walking out to-night?" It was not my business to interpret her meaning, before she had thought fit to confide her secret to me. "To my mind, my dear," was all I said, "it is a very beautiful view."

She fell silent again, and absorbed herself in her own thoughts. We turned into a new winding of the valley—and there, walking towards us from the opposite direction, was a human figure at last—the figure of a solitary man!

As we got nearer to each other, I perceived that he was a gentleman; dressed in a light shooting-jacket, and wearing a felt hat of the conical Italian shape. A little nearer—and I saw that he was young. Nearer still—and I discovered that he was handsome, though in rather an effeminate way. At the same moment, Lucilla heard his footstep. Her colour instantly rose; and once again I felt her hand tighten involuntarily around my arm. (Good! Here was the mysterious object of Zillah's warning to me found at last!)

I have, and I don't mind acknowledging it, an eye for a handsome man. I looked at him as he passed us. Now, I solemnly assure you, I am not an ugly woman. Nevertheless, as our eyes met, I saw the strange gentleman's face suddenly contract, with an expression which told me plainly that I had produced a disagreeable impression on him. With some difficulty—for my companion was holding my arm, and seemed to be disposed to stop altogether—I quickened my pace so as to get by him rapidly; showing him, I dare say, that I thought the change in his face when I looked

at him, an impertinence on his part. However that may be, after a momentary interval, I heard his step behind. The man had turned, and had followed us.

He came close to me, on the opposite side to Lucilla, and took off his hat.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," he said. "You looked at me just now."

At the first sound of his voice, I felt Lucilla start. Her hand began to tremble on my arm with some sudden agitation, inconceivable to me. In the double surprise of discovering this, and of finding myself charged so abruptly with the offence of looking at a gentleman, I suffered the most exceptional of all losses (where a woman is concerned)—the loss of my tongue.

He gave me no time to recover myself. He proceeded with what he had to say—speaking, mind, in the tone of a perfectly well-bred man; with nothing wild in his look, and nothing odd in his manner.

"Excuse me, if I venture on asking you a very strange question," he went on. "Did you happen to be at Exeter, on the third of last month?"

(I must have been more or less than woman, if I had not recovered the use of my tongue now !)

"I never was at Exeter in my life, sir," I answered. "May I ask, on my side, why you put the question to me ?"

Instead of replying, he looked at Lucilla.

"Pardon me, once more. Perhaps this young lady——?"

He was plainly on the point of enquiring next, whether Lucilla had been at Exeter—when he checked himself. In the breathless interest which she felt in what was going on, she had turned her full face upon him. There was still light enough left for her eyes to tell their own sad story, in their own mute way. As he read the truth in them, the man's face changed from the keen look of scrutiny which it had worn thus far, to an expression of compassion—I had almost said, of distress. He again took off his hat, and bowed to me with the deepest respect.

"I beg your pardon," he said, very earnestly. "I beg the young lady's pardon. Pray forgive me. My strange behaviour has its excuse—if I could bring myself to explain

it. You distressed me, when you looked at me. I can't explain why. Good evening."

He turned away hastily, like a man confused and ashamed of himself—and left us. I can only repeat that there was nothing strange or flighty in his manner. A perfect gentleman, in full possession of his senses—there is the unexaggerated and the just description of him.

I looked at Lucilla. She was standing, with her blind face raised to the sky, lost in herself, like a person wrapped in ecstacy.

"Who is that man?" I asked.

My question brought her down suddenly from heaven to earth. "Oh!" she said reproachfully, "I had his voice still in my ears—and now I have lost it! 'Who is he?'" she added, after a moment; repeating my question. "Nobody knows. Tell me—what is he like. Is he beautiful? He *must* be beautiful, with that voice!"

"Is this the first time you have heard his voice?" I inquired.

"Yes. He passed us yesterday, when I was out with Zillah. But he never spoke.

What is he like? Do, pray tell me—what is he like?"

There was a passionate impatience in her tone which warned me not to trifle with her. The darkness was coming. I thought it wise to propose returning to the house. She consented to do anything I liked, as long as I consented, on my side, to describe the unknown man.

All the way back, I was questioned and cross-questioned till I felt like a witness under skilful examination in a court of law. Lucilla appeared to be satisfied, so far, with the results. "Ah!" she exclaimed, letting out the secret which her old nurse had confided to me. "*You* can use your eyes. Zillah could tell me nothing."

When we got home again, her curiosity took another turn. "Exeter?" she said, considering with herself. "He mentioned Exeter. I am like you—I never was there. What will books tell us about Exeter?" She despatched Zillah to the other side of the house for a gazetteer. I followed the old woman into the corridor, and set her mind at ease, in a whisper. "I have kept what you told me a secret," I

said. "The man was out in the twilight, as you foresaw. I have spoken to him; and I am quite as curious as the rest of you. Get the book."

Lucilla had (to confess the truth) infected me with her idea, that the gazetteer might help us in interpreting the stranger's remarkable question relating to the third of last month, and his extraordinary assertion that I had distressed him when I looked at him. With the nurse breathless on one side of me, and Lucilla breathless on the other, I opened the book at the letter "E," and found the place, and read aloud these lines, as follows:—

"EXETER. A city and seaport in Devonshire. Formerly the seat of the West Saxon Kings. It has a large foreign and home commerce. Population 33,738. The Assizes for Devonshire are held at Exeter in the spring and summer."

"Is that all?" asked Lucilla.

I shut the book, and answered, like Finch's boy, in three monosyllabic words:

"That is all."

CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

CANDLELIGHT VIEW OF THE MAN.

THERE had been barely light enough left for me to read by. Zillah lit the candles and drew the curtains. The silence which betokens a profound disappointment reigned in the room.

"Who *can* he be?" repeated Lucilla, for the hundredth time. "And why should your looking at him have distressed him? Guess, Madame Pratolungo!"

The last sentence in the gazetteer's description of Exeter hung a little on my mind—in consequence of there being one word in it which I did not quite understand—the word "Assizes." I have, I hope, shown that I possess a competent knowledge of the English language, by this time. But my experience

fails a little on the side of phrases consecrated to the use of the law. I inquired into the meaning of "Assizes;" and was informed that it signified movable Courts, for trying prisoners at given times, in various parts of England. Hearing this, I had another of my inspirations. I guessed immediately that the interesting stranger was a criminal escaped from the Assizes.

Worthy old Zillah started to her feet, convinced that I had hit him off (as the English saying is) to a T. "Mercy preserve us!" cried the nurse, "I haven't bolted the garden door!"

She hurried out of the room to defend us from robbery and murder, before it was too late. I looked at Lucilla. She was leaning back in her chair, with a smile of quiet contempt on her pretty face. "Madame Pratolungo," she remarked, "that is the first foolish thing you have said, since you have been here."

"Wait a little, my dear," I rejoined. "You have declared that nothing is known of this man. Now you mean by that—nothing which satisfies *you*. He has not dropped down from Heaven, I suppose? The time when he came

here, must be known. Also, whether he came alone, or not. Also, how and where he has found a lodging in the village. Before I admit that my guess is completely wrong, I want to hear what general observation in Dimchurch has discovered on the subject of this gentleman. How long has he been here?"

Lucilla did not, at first, appear to be much interested in the purely practical view of the question which I had just placed before her.

"He has been here a week," she answered carelessly.

"Did he come, as I came, over the hills?"

"Yes."

"With a guide, of course?"

Lucilla suddenly sat up in her chair.

"With his brother," she said. "His *twin* brother, Madame Pratolungo."

I sat up in *my* chair. The appearance of his twin-brother in the story was a complication in itself. Two criminals escaped from the Assizes, instead of one!

"How did they find their way here?" I asked next.

"Nobody knows."

"Where did they go to, when they got here?"

"To the Cross-Hands—the little public-house in the village. The landlord told Zillah he was perfectly astonished at the resemblance between them. It was impossible to know which was which—it was wonderful, even for twins. They arrived early in the day, when the tap-room was empty; and they had a long talk together in private. At the end of it, they rang for the landlord, and asked if he had a bed-room to let in the house. You must have seen for yourself that The Cross-Hands is a mere beer-shop. The landlord had a room that he could spare—a wretched place, not fit for a gentleman to sleep in. One of the brothers took the room for all that."

"What became of the other brother?"

"He went away the same day—very unwillingly. The parting between them was most affecting. The brother who spoke to us to-night insisted on it—or the other would have refused to leave him. They both shed tears——"

"They did worse than that," said old Zillah, re-entering the room at the moment. "I have

made all the doors and windows fast, downstairs; he can't get in now, my dear, if he tries."

"What did they do that was worse than crying?" I enquired.

"Kissed each other!" said Zillah, with a look of profound disgust. "Two men!"

"Perhaps they are foreigners?" I suggested. "Did they give themselves a name?"

"The landlord asked the one who stayed behind for his name," replied Lucilla. "He said it was 'Dubourg.'"

This confirmed me in my belief that I had guessed right. "Dubourg" is as common a name in my country as "Jones" or "Thompson" is in England—just the sort of feigned name that a man in difficulties would give among *us*. Was he a criminal countryman of mine? No! There had been nothing foreign in his accent when he spoke. Pure English—there could be no doubt of that. And yet he had given a French name. Had he deliberately insulted my nation? Yes! Not content with being stained by innumerable crimes, he had added to the list of his atrocities—he had insulted my nation!

"Well?" I resumed. "We have left this undetected ruffian, deserted in the public-house. Is he there still?"

"Bless your heart!" cried the old nurse, "he is settled in the neighbourhood. He has taken Browndown."

I turned to Lucilla. "Browndown belongs to Somebody," I said, hazarding another guess. "Did Somebody let it without a reference?"

"Browndown belongs to a gentleman at Brighton," answered Lucilla. "And the gentleman was referred to a well-known name in London—one of the great City merchants. Here is the most provoking part of the whole mystery. The merchant said, 'I have known Mr. Dubourg from his childhood. He has reasons for wishing to live in the strictest retirement. I answer for his being an honourable man, to whom you can safely let your house. More than this I am not authorised to tell you.' My father knows the landlord of Browndown; and that is what the reference said to him, word for word. Isn't it provoking? The house was let for six months certain, the next day. It is wretchedly furnished. Mr. Dubourg has had several things

that he wanted sent from Brighton. Besides the furniture, a packing-case from London arrived at the house to-day. It was so strongly nailed up that the carpenter had to be sent for to open it. He reports that the case was full of thin plates of gold and silver; and it was accompanied by a box of extraordinary tools, the use of which was a mystery to the carpenter himself. Mr. Dubourg locked up these things in a room at the back of the house, and put the key in his pocket. He seemed to be pleased—he whistled a tune, and said, 'Now we shall do!' The landlady at the Cross-Hands is our authority for this. She does what little cooking he requires; and her daughter makes his bed, and so on. They go to him in the morning, and return to the inn in the evening. He has no servant with him. He is all by himself at night. Isn't it interesting? A mystery in real life. It baffles everybody."

"You must be very strange people, my dear," I said, "to make a mystery of such a plain case as this."

"Plain?" repeated Lucilla, in amazement.

"Certainly! The gold and silver plates,

and the strange tools, and the living in retirement, and the sending the servants away at night—all point to the same conclusion. My guess is the right one. The man is an escaped criminal; and his form of crime is coining false money. He has been discovered at Exeter—he has escaped the officers of justice—and he is now going to begin again here. You can do as you please. If *I* happen to want change, I won't get it in this neighbourhood."

Lucilla laid herself back in her chair again. I could see that she gave me up, in the matter of Mr. Dubourg, as a person wilfully and incorrigibly wrong.

"A coiner of false money, recommended as an honourable man by one of the first merchants in London!" she exclaimed. "We do some very eccentric things in England, occasionally—but there is a limit to our national madness, Madame Pratolungo, and you have reached it. Shall we have some music?"

She spoke a little sharply. Mr. Dubourg was the hero of her romance. She resented—seriously resented—any attempt on my part to lower him in her estimation.

I persisted in my unfavourable opinion of

him, nevertheless. The question between us (as I might have told her) was a question of believing, or not believing, in the merchant of London. To her mind, it was a sufficient guarantee of his integrity that he was a rich man. To my mind, (speaking as a good Socialist), that very circumstance told dead against him. A capitalist is a robber of one sort, and a coiner is a robber of another sort. Whether the capitalist recommends the coiner, or the coiner the capitalist, is all one to me. In either case (to quote the language of an excellent English play) the honest people are the soft easy cushions on which these knaves repose and fatten. It was on the tip of my tongue to put this large and liberal view of the subject to Lucilla. But (alas!) it was easy to see that the poor child was infected by the narrow prejudices of the class amid which she lived. How could I find it in my heart to run the risk of a disagreement between us on the first day? No—it was not to be done. I gave the nice pretty blind girl a kiss. And we went to the piano together. And I put off making a good Socialist of Lucilla till a more convenient opportunity.

We might as well have left the piano unopened. The music was a failure.

I played my best. From Mozart to Beethoven. From Beethoven to Schubert. From Schubert to Chopin. She listened with all the will in the world to be pleased. She thanked me again and again. She tried, at my invitation, to play herself; choosing the familiar compositions which she knew by ear. No! The abominable Dubourg, having got the uppermost place in her mind, kept it. She tried, and tried, and tried—and could do nothing. His voice was still in her ears—the only music which could possess itself of her attention that night. I took her place, and began to play again. She suddenly snatched my hands off the keys. "Is Zillah here?" she whispered. I told her Zillah had left the room. She laid her charming head on my shoulder, and sighed hysterically. "I can't help thinking of him," she burst out. "I am miserable for the first time in my life—no! I am happy for the first time in my life. Oh, what must you think of me! I don't know what I am talking about. Why did you encourage him to speak to us? I might never have heard his voice but for

you." She lifted her head again with a little shiver, and composed herself. One of her hands wandered here and there over the keys of the piano, playing softly. "His charming voice!" she whispered dreamily while she played. "Oh, his charming voice!" She paused again. Her hand dropped from the piano, and took mine. "Is this love?" she said, half to herself, half to me.

My duty as a respectable woman lay clearly before me—my duty was to tell her a lie.

"It is nothing, my dear, but too much excitement, and too much fatigue," I said. "To-morrow you shall be my young lady again. To-night you must be only my child. Come, and let me put you to bed."

She yielded with a weary sigh. Ah, how lovely she looked in her pretty night dress, on her knees at the bedside—the innocent, afflicted creature—saying her prayers!

I am, let me own, an equally headlong woman at loving and hating. When I had left her for the night, I could hardly have felt more tenderly interested in her if she had been really a child of my own. You have met with people of my sort—unless you are a

very forbidding person indeed—who have talked to you in the most confidential manner of all their private affairs, on meeting you in a railway carriage, or sitting next to you at a table-d'hôte. For myself, I believe I shall go on running up sudden friendships with strangers to my dying day. Infamous Dubourg! If I could have got into Browndown that night, I should have liked to have done to him what a Mexican maid of mine (at the Central American period of my career) did to her drunken husband—who was a kind of pedlar, dealing in whips and sticks. She sewed him strongly up one night in the sheet, while he lay snoring off his liquor in bed; and then she took his whole stock-in-trade out of the corner of the room, and broke it on him, to the last article on sale, until he was beaten to a jelly from head to foot.

Not having this resource open to me, I sat myself down in my bed-room, to consider—if the matter of Dubourg went any farther—what it was my business to do next.

I have already mentioned that Lucilla and I had idled away the whole afternoon, woman-like, in talking of ourselves. You will bear

understand what course my reflections took, if I here relate the chief particulars which Lucilla communicated to me, concerning her own singular position in her father's house.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH.

A CAGE OF FINCHES.

LARGE families are—as my experience goes—of two sorts. We have the families whose members all admire each other. And we have the families whose members all detest each other. For myself, I prefer the second sort. Their quarrels are their own affair; and they have a merit which the first sort are never known to possess—the merit of being sometimes able to see the good qualities of persons who do not possess the advantage of being related to them by blood. The families whose members all admire each other, are families saturated with insufferable conceit. You happen to speak of Shakspere, among these people, as a type of supreme intellectual

capacity. A female member of the family will not fail to convey to you that you would have illustrated your meaning far more completely if you had referred her to "dear Papa." You are out walking with a male member of the household; and you say of a woman who passes, "What a charming creature!" Your companion smiles at your simplicity, and wonders whether you have ever seen his sister when she is dressed for a ball. These are the families who cannot be separated without corresponding with each other every day. They read you extracts from their letters, and say, "Where is the writer by profession who can equal this?" They talk of their private affairs, in your presence—and appear to think that you ought to be interested too. They enjoy their own jokes across you at table—and wonder how it is that you are not amused. In domestic circles of this sort the sisters sit habitually on the brothers' knees; and the husbands inquire into the wives' ailments, in public, as unconcernedly as if they were closeted in their own room. When we arrive at a more advanced state of civilisation, the State will supply cages for these intolerable

people; and notices will be posted at the corners of streets, "Beware of Number Twelve: a family in a state of mutual admiration is hung up there!"

I gathered from Lucilla that the Finches were of the second order of large families, as mentioned above. Hardly one of the members of this domestic group was on speaking terms with the other. And some of them had been separated for years, without once troubling Her Majesty's Post Office to convey even the slightest expression of sentiment from one to the other.

The first wife of Reverend Finch was a Miss Batchford. The members of her family (limited at the time of the marriage to her brother and her sister) strongly disapproved of her choice of a husband. The rank of a Finch (I laugh at these contemptible distinctions!) was decided, in this case, to be not equal to the rank of a Batchford. Nevertheless, Miss married. Her brother and sister declined to be present at the ceremony. First quarrel.

Lucilla was born. Reverend Finch's elder brother (on speaking terms with no other

member of the family) interfered, with a Christian proposal—namely—to shake hands across the baby's cradle. Adopted by the magnanimous Batchfords. First reconciliation.

Time passed. Reverend Finch—then officiating in a poor curacy near a great manufacturing town—felt a want (the want of money); and took a liberty (the liberty of attempting to borrow of his brother-in-law). Mr. Batchford, being a rich man, regarded this overture, it is needless to say, in the light of an insult. Miss Batchford sided with her brother. Second quarrel.

Time passed, as before. Mrs. Finch the first, died. Reverend Finch's elder brother (still at daggers drawn with the other members of the family) made a second Christian proposal—namely—to shake hands across the wife's grave. Adopted once more by the bereaved Batchfords. Second reconciliation.

Another lapse of time. Reverend Finch, left a widower with one daughter, became personally acquainted with an inhabitant of the great city near which he ministered, who

was also a widower with one daughter. The status of the parent, in this case—social-political-religious—was Shoemaker-Radical-Baptist. Reverend Finch, still wanting money, swallowed it all; and married the daughter, with a dowry of three thousand pounds. This proceeding alienated from him for ever, not the Batchfords only, but the peacemaking elder brother as well. That excellent Christian ceased to be on speaking terms now with his brother the clergyman, as well as with all the rest of the family. The complete isolation of Reverend Finch followed. Regularly every year did the second Mrs. Finch afford opportunities of shaking hands, not only over one cradle, but sometimes over two. Vain and meritorious fertility! Nothing came of it, but a kind of compromise. Lucilla, quite overlooked among the rector's rapidly-increasing second family, was allowed to visit her maternal uncle and aunt at stated periods in every year. Born, to all appearance, with the full possession of her sight, the poor child had become incurably blind before she was a year old. In all other respects, she presented a striking resemblance to her

mother. Bachelor uncle-Batchford, and his old maiden sister, both conceived the strongest affection for the child. "Our niece Lucilla," they said, "has justified our fondest hopes—she is a Batchford, not a Finch!" Lucilla's father (promoted, by this time, to the rectory of Dimchurch) let them talk. "Wait a bit, and money will come of it," was all *he* said. Truly, money was wanted!—with fruitful Mrs. Finch multiplying cradles, year after year, till the doctor himself (employed on contract) got tired of it, and said one day, "It is not true that there is an end to everything: there is no end to the multiplying capacity of Mrs. Finch."

Lucilla grew up from childhood to womanhood. She was twenty years old, before her father's expectations were realised, and the money came of it at last.

Uncle Batchford died a single man. He divided his fortune between his maiden sister, and his niece. When she came of age, Lucilla was to have an income of fifteen hundred pounds a year—on certain conditions, which the will set forth at great length. The effect of these conditions was (first) to render it

absolutely impossible for Reverend Finch, under any circumstances whatever, to legally inherit a single farthing of the money—and (secondly), to detach Lucilla from her father's household, and to place her under the care of her maiden aunt, so long as she remained unmarried, for a period of three months in every year.

The will avowed the object of this last condition in the plainest words. "I die as I have lived" (wrote uncle Batchford) "a High Churchman and a Tory. My legacy to my niece shall only take effect on these terms—namely—that she shall be removed at certain stated periods from the Dissenting and Radical influences to which she is subjected under her father's roof, and shall be placed under the care of an English gentlewoman who unites to the advantages of birth and breeding the possession of high and honourable principles" —etcetera, etcetera. Can you conceive Reverend Finch's feelings, sitting, with his daughter by his side, among the company, while the will was read, and hearing this? He got up, like a true Englishman, and made them a speech. "Ladies and gentlemen," he

said, "I admit that I am a Liberal in politics, and that my wife's family are Dissenters. As an example of the principles thus engendered in my household, I beg to inform you that my daughter accepts this legacy with my full permission, and that I forgive Mr. Batchford." With that, he walked out, with his daughter on his arm. He had heard enough, please to observe, to satisfy him that Lucilla (while she lived unmarried) could do what she liked with her income. Before they had got back to Dimchurch, Reverend Finch had completed a domestic arrangement which permitted his daughter to occupy a perfectly independent position in the rectory, and which placed in her father's pockets—as Miss Finch's contribution to the housekeeping—five hundred a year.

(Do you know what I felt when I heard this? I felt the deepest regret that Finch of the liberal principles had not made a third with my poor Pratolungo and me in Central America. With him to advise us, we should have saved the sacred cause of Freedom without spending a single farthing on it!)

The old side of the rectory, hitherto unin-

habited, was put in order and furnished—of course at Lucilla's expense. On her twenty-first birthday, the repairs were completed ; the first instalment of the housekeeping money was paid ; and the daughter was established, as an independent lodger, in her own father's house !

In order to thoroughly appreciate Finch's ingenuity, it is necessary to add here that Lucilla had shown, as she grew up, an increasing dislike of living at home. In her blind state, the endless turmoil of the children distracted her. She and her step-mother did not possess a single sympathy in common. Her relations with her father were in much the same condition. She could compassionate his poverty, and she could treat him with the forbearance and respect due to him from his child. As to really venerating and loving him—the less said about that the better. Her happiest days had been the days she spent with her uncle and aunt ; her visits to the Batchfords had grown to be longer and longer visits with every succeeding year. If the father, in appealing to the daughter's sympathies, had not dexterously contrived to unite the preserva-

tion of her independence with the continuance of her residence under his roof, she would, on coming of age, either have lived altogether with her aunt, or have set up an establishment of her own. As it was, the rector had secured his five hundred a year, on terms acceptable to both sides—and, more than that, he had got her safe under his own eye. For, remark, there was one terrible possibility threatening him in the future—the possibility of Lucilla's marriage!

Such was the strange domestic position of this interesting creature, at the time when I entered the house.

You will now understand how completely puzzled I was when I recalled what had happened on the evening of my arrival, and when I asked myself—in the matter of the mysterious stranger—what course I was to take next. I had found Lucilla a solitary being—helplessly dependent in her blindness, on others—and, in that sad condition, without a mother, without a sister, without a friend even in whose sympathies she could take refuge, in whose advice she could trust. I had produced a first favourable impression on her;

I had won her liking at once, as she had won mine. I had accompanied her on an evening walk, innocent of all suspicion of what was going on in her mind. I had by pure accident enabled a stranger to intensify the imaginary interest which she felt in him, by provoking him to speak in her hearing for the first time. In a moment of hysterical agitation—and in sheer despair of knowing who else to confide in—the poor, foolish, blind, lonely girl had opened her heart to *me*. What was I to do?

If the case had been an ordinary one, the whole affair would have been simply ridiculous.

But the case of Lucilla was not the case of girls in general.

The minds of the blind are, by cruel necessity, forced inward on themselves. They live apart from us—ah, how hopelessly far apart!—in their own dark sphere, of which we know nothing. What relief could come to Lucilla from the world outside? None! It was part of her desolate liberty to be free to dwell unremittingly on the ideal creature of her own dream. Within the narrow limit of the one impression that it had been possible for her

to derive of this man—the impression of the beauty of his voice—her fancy was left to work unrestrained in the changeless darkness of her life. What a picture! I shudder as I draw it. Oh, yes, it is easy, I know, to look at it the other way—to laugh at the folly of a girl, who first excites her imagination about a total stranger; and then, when she hears him speak, falls in love with his voice! But add that the girl is blind; that the girl lives habitually in the world of her own imagination; that the girl has nobody at home who can exercise a wholesome influence over her. Is there nothing pitiable in such a state of things as this? For myself, though I come of a light-hearted nation that laughs at everything—I saw my own face looking horribly grave and old, as I sat before the glass that night, brushing my hair.

I looked at my bed. Bah! what was the use of going to bed?

She was her own mistress. She was perfectly free to take her next walk to Browndown alone! and to place herself, for all I knew to the contrary, at the mercy of a dishonourable and designing man. What was I?

Only her companion. I had no right to interfere—and yet, if anything happened, I should be blamed. It is so easy to say, "You ought to have done something." Who could I consult? The worthy old nurse only held the position of servant. Could I address myself to the lymphatic lady with the baby in one hand, and the novel in the other? Absurd! her stepmother was not to be thought of. Her father? Judging by hearsay, I had not derived a favourable impression of the capacity of Reverend Finch for interfering successfully in a matter of this sort. However, he *was* her father; and I could feel my way cautiously with him at first. Hearing Zillah moving about the corridor, I went out to her. In the course of a little gossip, I introduced the name of the master of the house. How was it I had not seen him yet? For an excellent reason. He had gone to visit a friend at Brighton. It was then Tuesday. He was expected back on "sermon-day"—that is to say on Saturday in the same week.

I returned to my room, a little out of temper. In this state my mind works with wonderful freedom. I had another of my inspi-

rations. Mr. Dubourg had taken the liberty of speaking to me that evening. Good. I determined to go alone to Browndown the next morning, and take the liberty of speaking to Mr. Dubourg.

Was this resolution solely inspired by my interest in Lucilla? Or had my own curiosity been all the time working under the surface, and influencing the course of my reflections unknown to myself? I went to bed without inquiring. I recommend you to go to bed without inquiring too.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH.

DAYLIGHT VIEW OF THE MAN.

WHEN I put out my candle that night, I made a mistake—I trusted entirely to myself to wake in good time in the morning. I ought to have told Zillah to call me.

Hours passed before I could close my eyes. It was broken rest when it came, until the day dawned. Then I fell asleep at last in good earnest. When I woke, and looked at my watch, I was amazed to find that it was ten o'clock.

I jumped out of bed, and rang for the old nurse. Was Lucilla at home? No: she had gone out for a little walk. By herself? Yes —by herself. In what direction? Up the valley, towards Browndown.

I instantly arrived at my own conclusion.

She had got the start of me—thanks to my laziness in sleeping away the precious hours of the morning in bed. The one thing to do, was to follow her as speedily as possible. In half an hour more, *I* was out for a little walk by myself—and (what do you think?) *my* direction also was up the valley, towards Browndown.

A pastoral solitude reigned round the lonely little house. I went on beyond it, into the next winding of the valley. Not a human creature was to be seen. I returned to Browndown to reconnoitre. Ascending the rising ground on which the house was built, I approached it from the back. The windows were all open. I listened. (Do you suppose I felt scruples in such an emergency as this? Oh, pooh! pooh! who but a fool would have felt anything of the sort!) I listened with both my ears. Through a window at the side of the house, I heard the sound of voices. Advancing noiselessly on the turf, I heard the voice of Dubourg. He was answered by a woman. Aha, I had caught her. Lucilla herself!

"Wonderful!" I heard him say. "I believe you have eyes in the ends of your fingers. Take this, now—and try if you can tell me what it is."

"A little vase," she answered—speaking, I give you my word of honour, as composedly as if she had known him for years. "Wait! what metal is it? Silver? No. Gold. Did you really make this yourself as well as the box?"

"Yes. It is an odd taste of mine—isn't it?—to be fond of chasing in gold and silver. Years ago, I met with a man in Italy, who taught me. It amused me, then—and it amuses me now. When I was recovering from an illness last spring, I shaped that vase out of the plain metal, and made the ornaments on it."

"Another mystery revealed!" she exclaimed. "Now I know what you wanted with those gold and silver plates that came to you from London. Are you aware of what a character you have got here? There are some of us who suspect you of coining false money!"

They both burst out laughing as gaily as a couple of children. I declare I wished my-

self one of the party! But no. I had my duty to do as a respectable woman. My duty was to steal a little nearer, and see if any familiarities were passing between these two merry young people. One half of the open window was sheltered, on the outer side, by a Venetian blind. I stood behind the blind, and peeped in. (Duty! oh, dear me, painful, but necessary duty!) Dubourg was sitting with his back to the window. Lucilla faced me opposite to him. Her cheeks were flushed with pleasure. She held in her lap a pretty little golden vase. Her clever fingers were passing over it rapidly, exactly as they had passed, the previous evening, over my face.

"Shall I tell you what the pattern is on your vase?" she went on.

"Can you really do that?"

"You shall judge for yourself. The pattern is made of leaves, with birds placed among them, at intervals. Stop! I think I have felt leaves like these on the old side of the rectory, against the wall. Ivy?"

"Amazing! it *is* ivy."

"The birds," she resumed. "I shan't be satisfied till I have told you what the birds

are. Haven't I got silver birds like them—only much larger—for holding pepper, and mustard, and sugar, and so on. Owls!" she exclaimed, with a cry of triumph. "Little owls, sitting in ivy-nests. What a delightful pattern! I never heard of anything like it before."

"Keep the vase!" he said. "You will honour me, you will delight me, if you will keep the vase."

She rose and shook her head—without giving him back the vase, however.

"I might take it, if you were not a stranger," she said. "Why don't you tell us who you are, and what your reason is for living all by yourself in this dull place?"

He stood before her, with his head down, and sighed bitterly.

"I know I ought to explain myself," he answered. "I can't be surprised if people are suspicious of me." He paused, and added very earnestly, "I can't tell it to *you*. Oh, no—not to *you!*"

"Why not?"

"Don't ask me!"

She felt for the table, with her ivory cane,

and put the vase down on it—very unwillingly.

"Good morning, Mr. Dubourg," she said.

He opened the door of the room for her in silence. Waiting close against the side of the house, I saw them appear under the porch, and cross the little walled enclosure in front. As she stepped out on the open turf beyond, she turned, and spoke to him again.

"If you won't tell *me* your secret," she said, "will you tell it to some one else? Will you tell it to a friend of mine?"

"To what friend?" he asked.

"To the lady whom you met with me last night."

He hesitated. "I am afraid I offended the lady," he said.

"So much the more reason for your explaining yourself," she rejoined. "If you will only satisfy *her*, I might ask you to come and see us—I might even take the vase." With that strong hint, she actually gave him her hand at parting. Her perfect self-possession, her easy familiarity with this stranger—so bold and yet so innocent—petrified me. "I shall send my friend to you this morning,"

she said imperiously, striking her cane on the turf. "I insist on your telling her the whole truth."

With that, she signed to him that he was to follow her no farther, and went her way back to the village.

Does it not surprise you, as it surprised me? Instead of her blindness making her nervous in the presence of a man unknown to her, it appeared to have exactly the contrary effect. It made her fearless.

He stood on the spot where she had left him, watching her as she receded in the distance. His manner towards her, in the house and out of the house, had exhibited, it is only fair to say, the utmost consideration and respect. Whatever shyness there had been between them, was shyness entirely on his side. I had a short stuff dress on, which made no noise over the grass. I skirted the wall of the enclosure, and approached him, unsuspected, from behind. "The charming creature!" he said to himself, still following her with his eyes. As the words passed his lips, I struck him smartly on the shoulder with my parasol.

"Mr. Dubourg," I said, "I am waiting to hear the truth."

He started violently—and confronted me in speechless dismay; his colour coming and going like the colour of a young girl. Anybody who understands women will understand that this behaviour on his part, far from softening me towards him, only encouraged me to bully him.

"In your present position in this place, sir," I went on, "do you think it honourable conduct on your part to decoy a young lady, to whom you are a perfect stranger, into your house—a young lady who claims, in right of her sad affliction, even more than the usual forbearance and respect which a gentleman owes to her sex?"

His shifting colour settled, for the time, into an angry red.

"You are doing me a great injustice, ma'am," he answered. "It is a shame to say that I have failed in respect to the young lady! I feel the sincerest admiration and compassion for her. Circumstances justify me in what I have done; I could not have

acted otherwise. I refer you to the young lady herself."

His voice rose higher and higher—he was thoroughly offended with me. Need I add (seeing the prospect not far off of *his* bullying *me*), that I unblushingly shifted my ground, and tried a little civility next?

"If I have done you an injustice, sir, I ask your pardon," I answered. "Having said so much, I have only to add that I shall be satisfied if I hear what the circumstances are, from yourself."

This soothed his offended dignity. His gentler manner began to show itself again.

"The truth is," he said, "that I owe my introduction to the young lady to an ill-tempered little dog belonging to the people at the inn. The dog had followed the person here who attends on me: and it startled the lady by flying out and barking at her as she passed this house. After I had driven away the dog, I begged her to come in and sit down until she had recovered herself. Am I to blame for doing that? I don't deny that I felt the deepest interest in her and that I did my best to amuse her, while she honoured

me by remaining in my house. May I ask if I have satisfied you ?"

With the best will in the world to maintain my unfavourable opinion of him, I was, by this time, fairly forced to acknowledge to myself that the opinion was wrong. His explanation was, in tone and manner as well as in language, the explanation of a gentleman.

And, besides—though he was a little too effeminate for my taste—he really was such a handsome young man ! His hair was of a fine bright chestnut colour, with a natural curl in it. His eyes were of the lightest brown I had ever seen—with a singularly winning gentle modest expression in them. As for his complexion—so creamy and spotless and fair—he had no right to it: it ought to have been a woman's complexion, or at least a boy's. He looked indeed more like a boy than a man: his smooth face was quite uncovered, either by beard, whisker, or moustache. If he had asked me, I should have guessed him (though he was really three years older) to have been younger than Lucilla.

" Our acquaintance has begun rather oddly, sir," I said. " You spoke strangely to me last

night; and I have spoken hastily to you this morning. Accept my excuses—and let us try if we can't do each other justice in the end. I have something more to say to you before we part. Will you think me a very extraordinary woman, if I suggest that you may as well invite *me* next, to take a chair in your house?"

He laughed with the pleasantest good temper, and led the way in.

We entered the room in which he had received Lucilla; and sat down together on the two chairs near the window—with this difference—that I contrived to possess myself of the seat which he had occupied, and so to place him with his face to the light.

"Mr. Dubourg," I began, "you will already have guessed that I overheard what Miss Finch said to you at parting?"

He bowed, in silent acknowledgment that it was so—and began to toy nervously with the gold vase which Lucilla had left on the table.

"What do you propose to do?" I went on. You have spoken of the interest you feel in my young friend. If it is a true interest, it will lead you to merit her good opinion by complying with her request. Tell me plainly,

if you please. Will you come and see us, in the character of a gentleman who has satisfied two ladies that they can receive him as a neighbour and a friend? Or will you oblige me to warn the rector of Dimchurch that his daughter is in danger of permitting a doubtful character to force his acquaintance on her?"

He put the vase back on the table, and turned deadly pale.

"If you knew what I have suffered," he said; "if you had gone through what I have been compelled to endure——" His voice failed him; his soft brown eyes moistened; his head drooped. He said no more.

In common with all women, I like a man to *be* a man. There was, to my mind, something weak and womanish in the manner in which this Dubourg met the advance which I had made to him. He not only failed to move my pity—he was in danger of stirring up my contempt.

"I too have suffered," I answered. "I too have been compelled to endure. But there is this difference between us. *My* courage is not worn out. In your place, if I knew myself to be an honourable man, I would not allow the

breath of suspicion to rest on me for an instant. Cost what it might, I would vindicate myself. I should be ashamed to cry—I should speak."

That stung him. He started up on his feet.

"Have *you* been stared at by hundreds of cruel eyes?" he burst out passionately. "Have *you* been pointed at, without mercy, wherever you go? Have *you* been put in the pillory of the newspapers? Has the photograph proclaimed *your* infamous notoriety in all the shop-windows?" He dropped back into his chair, and wrung his hands in a frenzy. "Oh, the public!" he exclaimed; "the horrible public! I can't get away from them—I can't hide myself, even here. You have had your stare at me, like the rest," he cried, turning on me fiercely. "I knew it when you passed me last night."

"I never saw you out of this place," I answered. "As for the portraits of you, whoever you may be, I know nothing about them. I was far too anxious and too wretched, to amuse myself by looking into shop-windows before I came here. You, and your name, are equally strange to me. If you have any re-

spect for yourself, tell me who you are. Out with the truth, sir! You know as well as I do that you have gone too far to stop."

I seized him by the hand. I was wrought up by the extraordinary outburst that had escaped him to the highest pitch of excitement: I was hardly conscious of what I said or did. At that supreme moment, we enraged, we maddened each other. His hand closed convulsively on my hand. His eyes looked wildly into mine.

"Do you read the newspapers?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Have you seen——?"

"I have *not* seen the name of 'Dubourg'—"

"My name is not 'Dubourg.'"

"What is it?"

He suddenly stooped over me; and whispered his name in my ear.

In my turn I started, thunderstruck, to my feet.

"Good God!" I cried. "You are the man who was tried for murder last month, and who was all but hanged, on the false testimony of a clock!"

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH.

THE PERJURY OF THE CLOCK.

WE looked at one another in silence. Both alike, we were obliged to wait a little and recover ourselves.

I may occupy the interval by answering two questions which will arise in your minds in this place. How did Dubourg come to be tried for his life? And what was the connection between this serious matter and the false testimony of a clock.

The reply to both these inquiries is to be found in the story which I call the Perjury of the Clock.

In briefly relating this curious incidental narrative (which I take from a statement of the circumstances placed in my possession) I shall

speak of our new acquaintance at Browndown —and shall continue to speak of him throughout these pages—by his assumed name. In the first place, it was the maiden name of his mother, and he had a right to take it if he pleased. In the second place, the date of our domestic drama at Dimchurch goes back as far as the years 'fifty-eight and 'fifty-nine; and real names are (now that it is all over) of no consequence to anybody. With "Dubourg" we have begun. With "Dubourg" let us go on to the end.

On a summer evening, some years ago, a man was found murdered in a field near a certain town in the West of England. The name of the field was, "Pardon's Piece."

The man was a small carpenter and builder in the town, who bore an indifferent character. On the evening in question, a distant relative of his, employed as farm-bailiff by a gentleman in the neighbourhood, happened to be passing a stile which led from the field into a road, and saw a gentleman leaving the field by way of this stile, rather in a hurry. He recognised the gentleman (whom he knew by sight only) as Mr. Dubourg.

The two passed each other on the road in opposite directions. After a certain lapse of time—estimated as being half an hour—the farm-bailiff had occasion to pass back along the same road. On reaching the stile, he heard an alarm raised, and entered the field to see what was the matter. He found several persons running from the farther side of Pardon's Piece towards a boy who was standing at the back of a cattle-shed, in a remote part of the enclosure, screaming with terror. At the boy's feet lay, face downwards, the dead body of a man, with his head horribly beaten in. His watch was under him, hanging out of his pocket by the chain. It had stopped — evidently in consequence of the concussion of its owner's fall on it—at half-past eight. The body was still warm. All the other valuables, like the watch, were left on it. The farm-bailiff instantly recognised the man as the carpenter and builder mentioned above.

At the preliminary inquiry, the stoppage of the watch at half-past eight, was taken as offering good circumstantial evidence that the

blow which had killed the man had been struck at that time.

The next question was—if any one had been seen near the body at half-past eight? The farm-bailiff declared that he had met Mr. Dubourg hastily leaving the field by the stile at that very time. Asked if he had looked at his watch, he owned that he had not done so. Certain previous circumstances which he mentioned as having impressed themselves on his memory, enabled him to feel sure of the truth of his assertion, without having consulted his watch. He was pressed on this important point; but he held to his declaration. At half-past eight he had seen Mr. Dubourg hurriedly leave the field. At half-past eight the watch of the murdered man had stopped.

Had any other person been observed in or near the field at that time?

No witness could be discovered who had seen anybody else near the place. Had the weapon turned up, with which the blow had been struck? It had not been found. Was any one known (robbery having plainly not been the motive of the crime) to have enter-

tained a grudge against the murdered man? It was no secret that he associated with doubtful characters, male and female; but suspicion failed to point to any one of them in particular.

In this state of things, there was no alternative but to request Mr. Dubourg—well known in, and out of the town, as a young gentleman of independent fortune; bearing an excellent character—to give some account of himself.

He immediately admitted that he had passed through the field. But in contradiction to the farm-bailiff, he declared that *he* had looked at his watch at the moment before he crossed the stile, and that the time by it was exactly a quarter past eight. Five minutes later—that is to say ten minutes before the murder had been committed, on the evidence of the dead man's watch—he had paid a visit to a lady living near Pardon's Piece; and had remained with her, until his watch, consulted once more on leaving the lady's house, informed him that it was a quarter to nine.

Here was the defence called an "alibi." It entirely satisfied Mr. Dubourg's friends.

To satisfy justice also, it was necessary to call the lady as a witness. In the meantime, another purely formal question was put to Mr. Dubourg. Did he know anything of the murdered man?

With some appearance of confusion, Mr. Dubourg admitted that he had been induced (by a friend) to employ the man on some work. Further interrogation extracted from him the following statement of facts.

That the work had been very badly done —that an exorbitant price had been charged for it—that the man, on being remonstrated with, had behaved in a grossly impertinent manner—that an altercation had taken place between them—that Mr. Dubourg had seized the man by the collar of his coat, and had turned him out of the house—that he had called the man an infernal scoundrel (being in a passion at the time), and had threatened to "thrash him within an inch of his life" (or words to that effect) if he ever presumed to come near the house again; that he had sincerely regretted his own violence the moment he recovered his self-possession; and, lastly, that, on his oath (the altercation having oc-

curred six weeks ago), he had never spoken to the man, or set eyes on the man since.

As the matter then stood, these circumstances were considered as being unfortunate circumstances for Mr. Dubourg — nothing more. He had his "alibi" to appeal to, and his character to appeal to; and nobody doubted the result.

The lady appeared as witness.

Confronted with Mr. Dubourg on the question of time, and forced to answer, she absolutely contradicted him, on the testimony of the clock on her own mantel-piece. In substance, her evidence was simply this. She had looked at her clock, when Mr. Dubourg entered the room; thinking it rather a late hour for a visitor to call on her. The clock (regulated by the maker, only the day before) pointed to twenty-five minutes to nine. Practical experiment showed that the time required to walk the distance, at a rapid pace, from the stile to the lady's house, was just five minutes. Here then was the statement of the farm-bailiff (himself a respectable witness) corroborated by another witness of excellent position and character.

The clock, on being examined next, was found to be right. The evidence of the clockmaker proved that he kept the key, and that there had been no necessity to set the clock and wind it up again, since he had performed both those acts on the day preceding Mr. Dubourg's visit. The accuracy of the clock thus vouched for, the conclusion on the evidence was irresistible. Mr. Dubourg stood convicted of having been in the field at the time when the murder was committed; of having, by his own admission, had a quarrel with the murdered man, not long before, terminating in an assault and a threat on his side; and, lastly, of having attempted to set up an alibi by a false statement of the question of time. There was no alternative but to commit him to take his trial at the Assizes, charged with the murder of the builder in Pardon's Piece.

The trial occupied two days.

No new facts of importance were discovered in the interval. The evidence followed the course which it had taken at the preliminary examinations—with this difference only, that it was more carefully sifted. Mr. Dubourg had the double advantage of secur-

ing the services of the leading barrister in the circuit, and of moving the irrepressible sympathies of the jury, shocked at his position and eager for proof of his innocence. By the end of the first day, the evidence had told against him with such irresistible force, that his own counsel despaired of the result. When the prisoner took his place in the dock on the second day, there was but one conviction in the minds of the people in court—everybody said, "The clock will hang him."

It was nearly two in the afternoon; and the proceedings were on the point of being adjourned for half an hour, when the attorney for the prisoner was seen to hand a paper to the counsel for the defence.

The counsel rose, showing signs of agitation which roused the curiosity of the audience. He demanded the immediate hearing of a new witness; whose evidence in the prisoner's favour he declared to be too important to be delayed for a single moment. After a short colloquy between the judge and the barristers on either side, the court decided to continue the sitting.

The witness, appearing in the box, proved

to be a young woman, in delicate health. On the evening when the prisoner had paid his visit to the lady, she was in that lady's service as housemaid. The day after, she had been permitted (by previous arrangement with her mistress) to take a week's holiday, and to go on a visit to her parents, in the west of Cornwall. While there, she had fallen ill, and had not been strong enough since to return to her employment. Having given this preliminary account of herself, the housemaid then stated the following extraordinary particulars in relation to her mistress's clock.

On the morning of the day when Mr. Dubourg had called at the house, she had been cleaning the mantlepiece. She had rubbed the part of it which was under the clock with her duster, had accidentally struck the pendulum, and had stopped it. Having once before done this, she had been severely reproved. Fearing that a repetition of the offence, only the day after the clock had been regulated by the maker, might lead perhaps to the withdrawal of her leave of absence, she had determined to put matters right again, if possible, by herself.

After poking under the clock in the dark, and failing to set the pendulum going again properly in that way, she next attempted to lift the clock, and give it a shake. It was set in a marble case, with a bronze figure on the top; and it was so heavy that she was obliged to hunt for something which she could use as a lever. The thing proved to be not easy to find on the spur of the moment. Having at last laid her hand on what she wanted, she contrived so to lift the clock a few inches and drop it again on the mantelpiece, as to set it going once more.

The next necessity was of course to move the hands on. Here again she was met by an obstacle. There was a difficulty in opening the glass-case which protected the dial. After uselessly searching for some instrument to help her, she got from the footman (without telling him what she wanted it for) a small chisel. With this, she opened the case—after accidentally scratching the brass frame of it—and set the hands of the clock *by guess*. She was flurried at the time; fearing that her mistress would discover her. Later in the day, she found that she had over-estimated the interval

of time that had passed while she was trying to put the clock right. She had, in fact, set it, exactly *a quarter of an hour too fast.*

No safe opportunity of secretly putting the clock right again had occurred, until the last thing at night. She had then moved the hands back to the right time. At the hour of the evening when Mr. Dubourg had called on her mistress, she positively swore that the clock was a quarter of an hour too fast. It had pointed, as her mistress had declared, to twenty-five minutes to nine—the right time then being, as Mr. Dubourg had asserted, twenty minutes past eight.

Questioned as to why she had refrained from giving this extraordinary evidence at the inquiry before the magistrate, she declared that in the remote Cornish village to which she had gone the next day, and in which her illness had detained her from that time, nobody had heard of the inquiry or the trial. She would not have been then present to state the vitally important circumstances to which she had just sworn, if the prisoner's twin-brother had not found her out on the previous day—had not questioned her if she

knew anything about the clock—and had not (hearing what she had to tell) insisted on her taking the journey with him to the court the next morning.

This evidence virtually decided the trial. There was a great burst of relief in the crowded assembly when the woman's statement had come to an end.

She was closely cross-examined as a matter of course. Her character was inquired into; corroborative evidence (relating to the chisel and the scratches on the frame) was sought for, and was obtained. The end of it was that, at a late hour on the second evening, the jury acquitted the prisoner, without leaving their box. It was not too much to say that his life had been saved by his brother. His brother alone had persisted, from first to last, in obstinately disbelieving the clock—for no better reason than that the clock was the witness which asserted the prisoner's guilt! He had worried everybody with incessant inquiries—he had discovered the absence of the housemaid, after the trial had begun—and he had started off to interrogate the girl, knowing nothing, and suspecting nothing; simply de-

termined to persist in the one everlasting question with which he persecuted everybody belonging to the house: "The clock is going to hang my brother; can you tell me anything about the clock?"

Four months later, the mystery of the crime was cleared up. One of the disreputable companions of the murdered man confessed on his death-bed that he had done the deed. There was nothing interesting or remarkable in the circumstances. Chance which had put innocence in peril, had offered impunity to guilt. An infamous woman; a jealous quarrel; and an absence at the moment of witnesses on the spot—these were really the commonplace materials which had composed the tragedy of Pardon's Piece.

CHAPTER THE NINTH.

THE HERO OF THE TRIAL.

"YOU have forced it out of me. Now you have had your way, never mind my feelings—Go!"

Those were the first words the Hero of the Trial said to me, when he was able to speak again! He withdrew with a curious sullen resignation to the farther end of the room. There he stood looking at me, as a man might have looked who carried some contagion about him, and who wished to preserve a healthy fellow-creature from the peril of touching him.

"Why should I go?" I asked.

"You are a bold woman," he said, "to remain in the same room with a man who has been pointed at as a murderer, and who has been tried for his life."

The same unhealthy state of mind which had brought him to Dimchurch, and which had led him to speak to me as he had spoken on the previous evening, was, as I understood it, now irritating him against me as a person who had made his own quick temper the means of entrapping him into letting out the truth. How was I to deal with a man in this condition? I decided to perform the feat which you call in England, "taking the bull by the horns."

"I see but one man here," I said. "A man honourably acquitted of a crime which he was incapable of committing. A man who deserves my interest, and claims my sympathy. Shake hands, Mr. Dubourg."

I spoke to him in a good hearty voice, and I gave him a good hearty squeeze. The poor, weak, lonely persecuted young fellow dropped his head on my shoulder like a child, and burst out crying.

"Don't despise me!" he said, as soon as he had got his breath again. "It breaks a man down to have stood in the dock, and to have had hundreds of hard-hearted people staring at him in horror—without his deserving it.

Besides, I have been very lonely, ma'am, since my brother left me."

We sat down again, side by side. He was the strangest compound of anomalies I had ever met with. Throw him into one of those passions in which he flamed out so easily—and you would have said, This is a tiger. Wait till he had cooled down again to his customary mild temperature—and you would have said with equal truth, This is a lamb.

"One thing rather surprises me, Mr. Dubourg," I went on. "I can't quite understand——"

"Don't call me 'Mr. Dubourg,'" he interposed. "You remind me of the disgrace which has forced me to change my name. Call me by my Christian name. It's a foreign name. You are a foreigner by your accent—you will like me all the better for having a foreign name. I was christened 'Oscar'—after my mother's brother: my mother was a Jersey woman. Call me 'Oscar.'—What is it you don't understand?"

"In your present situation," I resumed, "I don't understand your brother leaving you here all by yourself."

He was on the point of flaming out again at that.

"Not a word against my brother!" he exclaimed fiercely. "My brother is the noblest creature that God ever created! You must own that yourself—you know what he did at the trial. I should have died on the scaffold but for that angel. I insist on it that he is not a man. He is an angel!"

(I admitted that his brother was an angel. The concession instantly pacified him.)

"People say there is no difference between us," he went on, drawing his chair companionably close to mine. "Ah, people are so shallow! Personally, I grant you, we are exactly alike. (You have heard that we are twins?) But there it ends, unfortunately for *me*. Nugent—(my brother was christened Nugent after my father)—Nugent is a hero! Nugent is a genius. I should have died if he hadn't taken care of me, after the trial. I had nobody but him. We are orphans; we have no brothers or sisters. Nugent felt the disgrace even more than I felt it—but *he* could control himself. It fell more heavily on him than it did on me. I'll tell you why. Nugent was

in a fair way to make our family name—the name that we have been obliged to drop—famous all over the world. He is a painter—a landscape-painter. Have you never heard of him? Ah, you soon will! Where do you think he has gone to? He has gone to the wilds of America, in search of new subjects. He is going to found a school of landscape painting. On an immense scale. A scale that has never been attempted yet. Dear fellow! Shall I tell you what he said when he left me here? Noble words—I call them noble words. 'Oscar! I go to make our assumed name famous. You shall be honourably known—you shall be illustrious, as the brother of Nugent Dubourg.' Do you think I could stand in the way of such a career as that? After what he has sacrificed for *me*, could I let Such a Man stagnate here—for no better purpose than to keep me company? What does it matter about *my* feeling lonely? Who am I? Oh, if you had seen how he bore with the horrible notoriety that followed us, after the trial! He was constantly stared at and pointed at, for *me*. Not a word of complaint escaped him. He snapped his fingers at it.

'*That* for public opinion!' he said. What strength of mind—eh? From one place after another we moved and moved, and still there were the photographs, and the newspapers, and the whole infamous story ('romance in real life,' they called it), known beforehand to everybody. *He* never lost heart. 'We shall find a place yet' (that was the cheerful way he put it); 'you have nothing to do with it, Oscar; you are safe in my hands; I promise you exactly the place of refuge you want.' It was he who got all the information, and found out this lonely part of England where you live. *I* thought it pretty as we wandered about the hills—it wasn't half grand enough for *him*. We lost ourselves. I began to feel nervous. He didn't mind it a bit. 'You have Me with you,' he said; 'My luck is always to be depended on. Mark what I say! We shall stumble on a village!' You will hardly believe me—in ten minutes more, we stumbled, exactly as he had foretold, on this place. He didn't leave me—when I had prevailed on him to go—without a recommendation. He recommended me to the landlord of the inn here. He said, 'My brother is delicate; my brother

wishes to live in retirement; you will oblige me by looking after my brother.' Wasn't it kind? The landlord seemed to be quite affected by it. Nugent cried when he took leave of me. Ah, what would I not give to have a heart like his and a mind like his! It's something—isn't it?—to have a face like him. I often say that to myself when I look in the glass. Excuse my running on in this way. When I once begin to talk of Nugent, I don't know when to leave off."

One thing, at any rate, was plainly discernible in this otherwise inscrutable young man. He adored his twin-brother.

It would have been equally clear to me that Mr. Nugent Dubourg deserved to be worshipped, if I could have reconciled to my mind his leaving his brother to shift for himself in such a place as Dimchurch. I was obliged to remind myself of the admirable service which he had rendered at the trial, before I could decide to do him the justice of suspending my opinion of him, in his absence. Having accomplished this act of magnanimity, I took advantage of the first opportunity to change the subject. The most tiresome in-

formation that I am acquainted with, is the information which tells us of the virtues of an absent person—when that absent person happens to be a stranger.

"Is it true that you have taken Browndown for six months?" I asked. "Are you really going to settle at Dimchurch?"

"Yes—if you keep my secret," he answered. "The people here know nothing about me. Don't, pray don't, tell them who I am! You will drive me away, if you do."

"I must tell Miss Finch who you are," I said.

"No! no! no!" he exclaimed eagerly. "I can't bear the idea of her knowing it. I have been so horribly degraded. What will she think of me?" He burst into another explosion of rhapsodies on the subject of Lucilla—mixed up with renewed petitions to me to keep his story concealed from everybody. I lost all patience with his want of common fortitude and common sense.

"Young Oscar, I should like to box your ears!" I said. "You are in a villanously unwholesome state about this matter. Have you nothing else to think of? Have you no

profession? Are you not obliged to work for your living?"

I spoke, as you perceive, with some force of expression—aided by a corresponding asperity of voice and manner.

Mr. Oscar Dubourg looked at me with the puzzled air of a man who feels an overflow of new ideas forcing itself into his mind. He modestly admitted the degrading truth. From his childhood upwards, he had only to put his hand in his pocket, and to find the money there, without any preliminary necessity of earning it first. His father had been a fashionable portrait-painter, and had married one of his sitters—an heiress. Oscar and Nugent had been left in the detestable position of independent gentlemen. The dignity of labour was a dignity unknown to these degraded young men. "I despise a wealthy idler," I said to Oscar, with my republican severity. "You want the ennobling influences of labour to make a man of you. Nobody has a right to be idle—nobody has a right to be rich. You would be in a more wholesome state of mind about yourself, my young gentle-

man, if you had to earn your bread and cheese before you ate it."

He stared at me piteously. The noble sentiments which I had inherited from Doctor Pratolungo, completely bewildered Mr. Oscar Dubourg.

"Don't be angry with me," he said, in his innocent way. "I couldn't eat my cheese, if I did earn it. I can't digest cheese. Besides, I employ myself as much as I can." He took his little golden vase from the table behind him, and told me what I had already heard him tell Lucilla while I was listening at the window. "You would have found me at work this morning," he went on, "if the stupid people who send me my metal plates had not made a mistake. The alloy, in the gold and silver both, is all wrong this time. I must return the plates to be melted again before I can do anything with them. They are all ready to go back to-day, when the cart comes. If there are any labouring people here who want money, I'm sure I will give them some of mine with the greatest pleasure. It isn't my fault, ma'am, that my father married my mother. And how could I help it if he left

two thousand a year each to my brother and me?"

Two thousand a year each to his brother and him! And the illustrious Pratolungo had never known what it was to have five pounds sterling at his disposal before his union with Me!

I lifted my eyes to the ceiling. In my righteous indignation, I forgot Lucilla and her curiosity about Oscar—I forgot Oscar and his horror of Lucilla discovering who he was. I opened my lips to speak. In another moment I should have launched my thunderbolts against the whole infamous system of modern society, when I was silenced by the most extraordinary and unexpected interruption that ever closed a woman's lips.

CHAPTER THE TENTH.

FIRST APPEARANCE OF JICKS.

THERE walked in, at the open door of the room—softly, suddenly, and composedly — a chubby female child, who could not possibly have been more than three years old. She had no hat or cap on her head. A dirty pinafore covered her from her chin to her feet. This amazing apparition advanced into the middle of the room, holding hugged under one arm a ragged and disreputable-looking doll; stared hard, first at Oscar, then at me; advanced to my knees; laid the disreputable doll on my lap; and, pointing to a vacant chair at my side, claimed the rites of hospitality in these words:

"Jicks will sit down."

How was it possible, under these circum-

stances, to attack the infamous system of modern society? It was only possible to kiss "Jicks."

"Do you know who this is?" I inquired, as I lifted our visitor on to the chair.

Oscar burst out laughing. Like me, he now saw this mysterious young lady for the first time. Like me, he wondered what the extraordinary nick-name under which she had presented herself could possibly mean.

We looked at the child. The child—with its legs stretched out straight before it, terminating in a pair of little dusty boots with holes in them—lifted its large round eyes, overshadowed by a penthouse of unbrushed flaxen hair; looked gravely at us in return; and made a second call on our hospitality, as follows:

"Jicks will have something to drink."

While Oscar ran into the kitchen for some milk, I succeeded in discovering the identity of "Jicks."

Something—I cannot well explain what—in the manner in which the child had drifted into the room with her doll, reminded me of the lymphatic lady of the rectory, drifting back-

wards and forwards with the baby in one hand and the novel in the other. I took the liberty of examining "Jicks's" pinafore, and discovered the mark in one corner:—"Selina Finch." Exactly as I had supposed, here was a member of Mrs. Finch's numerous family. Rather a young member, as it struck me, to be wandering hatless round the environs of Dimchurch, all by herself.

Oscar returned with the milk in a mug. The child—insisting on taking the mug into her own hands—steadily emptied it to the last drop—recovered her breath with a gasp—looked at me with a white moustache of milk on her upper lip—and announced the conclusion of her visit, in these terms:

"Jicks will get down again."

I deposited our young friend on the floor. She took her doll, and stood for a moment deep in thought. What was she going to do next? We were not kept long in suspense. She suddenly put her little hot fat hand into mine, and tried to pull me after her out of the room.

"What do you want?" I asked.

Jicks answered in one untranslatable compound word:

"Man-Gee-gee."

I suffered myself to be pulled out of the room—to see "Man-Gee-gee," to play "Man-Gee-gee," or to eat "Man-Gee-gee," it was impossible to tell which. I was pulled along the passage—I was pulled out to the front door. There—having approached the house inaudibly to us, over the grass—stood the horse, cart, and man, waiting to take the case of gold and silver plates back to London. I looked at Oscar, who had followed me. We now understood, not only the masterly compound word of Jicks (signifying man and horse, and passing over cart as unimportant), but the polite attention of Jicks in entering the house to inform us, after a rest and a drink, of a circumstance which had escaped our notice. The driver of the cart had, on his own acknowledgment, been investigated and questioned by this extraordinary child, strolling up to the door of Browndown to see what he was doing there. Jicks was a public character at Dimchurch. The driver knew all about her. She had been nicknamed "Gipsy" from her wandering habits, and had shortened the name in her own dialect, into

"Jicks." There was no keeping her in at the rectory, try how you might: they had long since abandoned the effort in despair. Sooner or later, she turned up again—or somebody brought her back—or one of the sheep-dogs found her asleep under a bush, and gave the alarm. "What goes on in that child's head," said the driver, regarding Jicks with a sort of superstitious admiration, "the Lord only knows. She has a will of her own, and a way of her own. She *is* a child; and she *aint* a child. At three years of age, she's a riddle none of us can guess. And that's the long and the short of what I know about her."

While this explanation was in progress, the carpenter who had nailed up the case, and the carpenter's son, accompanying him, joined us in front of the house. They followed Oscar in, and came out again, bearing the heavy burden of precious metal—more than one man could conveniently lift—between them.

The case deposited in the cart, carpenter senior and carpenter junior got in after it, wanting "a lift" to Brighton. Carpenter senior, a big burly man, made a joke. "It's a lonely country between this and Brighton,

sir," he said to Oscar. "Three of us will be none too many to see your precious packing-case safe into the railway station." Oscar took it seriously. "Are there any robbers in this neighbourhood?" he asked. "Lord love you, sir!" said the driver, "robbers would starve in these parts; we have got nothing worth thieving here." Jicks—still watching the proceedings with an interest which allowed no detail to escape unnoticed—assumed the responsibility of starting the men on their journey. The odd child waved her chubby hand imperiously to her friend the driver, and cried in her loudest voice, "Away!" The driver touched his hat with comic respect. "All right, miss—time's money, aint it?" He cracked his whip, and the cart rolled off noiselessly over the thick close turf of the South Downs.

It was time for me to go back to the rectory, and to restore the wandering Jicks, for the time being, to the protection of home. I returned to Oscar, to say good-bye.

"I wish I was going back with you," he said.

"You will be as free as I am to come and go at the rectory," I answered, "when they

know what has passed this morning between you and me. In your own interests, I am determined to tell them who you are. You have nothing to fear, and everything to gain, by my speaking out. Clear your mind of fancies and suspicions that are unworthy of you. By to-morrow we shall be good neighbours; by the end of the week we shall be good friends. For the present, as we say in France, *au revoir!*"

I turned to take Jicks by the hand. While I had been speaking to Oscar, the child had slipped away from me. Not a sign of her was to be seen.

Before we could stir a step to search for our lost Gipsy, her voice reached our ears, raised shrill and angry in the regions behind us, at the side of the house.

"Go away!" we heard the child cry out impatiently. "Ugly men, go away!"

We turned the corner, and discovered two shabby strangers, resting themselves against the side wall of the house. Their cadaverous faces, their brutish expressions, and their frowsy clothes, proclaimed them, to my eye, as belonging to the vilest blackguard type that

the civilised earth has yet produced—the blackguard of London growth. There they lounged, with their hands in their pockets and their backs against the wall, as if they were airing themselves on the outer side of a public-house—and there stood Jicks, with her legs planted wide apart on the turf, asserting the rights of property (even at that early age!), and ordering the rascals off.

"What are you doing there?" asked Oscar sharply.

One of the men appeared to be on the point of making an insolent answer. The other—the younger and the viler-looking villain of the two—checked him, and spoke first.

"We've had a longish walk, sir," said the fellow, with an impudent assumption of humility; "and we've took the liberty of resting our backs against your wall, and feastin' our eyes on the beauty of your young lady here."

He pointed to the child. Jicks shook her fist at him, and ordered him off more fiercely than ever.

"There's an inn in the village," said Oscar. "Rest there, if you please—my house is not an inn."

The elder man made a second effort to speak, beginning with an oath. The younger checked him again.

"Shut up, Jim!" said the superior blackguard of the two. "The gentleman recommends the tap at the inn. Come and drink the gentleman's health." He turned to the child, and took off his hat to her with a low bow. "Wish you good morning, Miss! You're just the style, you are, that I admire. Please don't engage yourself to be married till I come back."

His savage companion was so tickled by this delicate pleasantry that he burst suddenly into a roar of laughter. Arm in arm, the two ruffians walked off together in the direction of the village. Our funny little Jicks became a tragic and terrible Jicks, all on a sudden. The child resented the insolence of the two men as if she really understood it. I never saw so young a creature in such a furious passion before. She picked up a stone, and threw it at them before I could stop her. She screamed, and stamped her tiny feet alternately on the ground, till she was purple in the face. She threw herself

down, and rolled in fury on the grass. Nothing pacified her but a rash promise of Oscar's (which he was destined to hear of for many a long day afterwards) to send for the police, and to have the two men soundly beaten for daring to laugh at Jicks. She got up from the ground, and dried her eyes with her knuckles, and fixed a warning look on Oscar. "Mind!" said this curious child, with her bosom still heaving under the dirty pinafore, "the men are to be beaten. And Jicks is to see it."

I said nothing to Oscar, at the time, but I felt some secret uneasiness on the way home —an uneasiness inspired by the appearance of the two men in the neighbourhood of Browndown.

It was impossible to say how long they might have been lurking about the outside of the house, before the child discovered them. They might have heard, through the open window, what Oscar had said to me on the subject of his plates of precious metal; and they might have seen the heavy packing-case placed in the cart. I felt no apprehension about the safe arrival of the case at Brighton;

the three men in the cart were men enough to take good care of it. My fears were for the future. Oscar was living, entirely by himself, in a lonely house, more than half a mile distant from the village. His fancy for chasing in the precious metals might have its dangers, as well as its attractions, if it became known beyond the pastoral limits of Dimchurch. Advancing from one suspicion to another, I asked myself if the two men had roamed by mere accident into our remote part of the world—or whether they had deliberately found their way to Browndown with a purpose in view. Having this doubt in my mind, and happening to encounter the old nurse, Zillah, in the garden as I entered the rectory gates with my little charge, I put the question to her plainly, "Do you see many strangers at Dimchurch?"

"Strangers?" repeated the old woman. "Excepting yourself, ma'am, we see no strangers here, from one year's end to another."

I determined to say a warning word to Oscar before his precious metals were sent back to Browndown.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH.

BLIND LOVE.

LUCILLA was at the piano when I entered the sitting-room.

"I wanted you of all things," she said. "I have sent all over the house in search of you. Where have you been?"

I told her.

She sprang to her feet with a cry of delight.

"You have persuaded him to trust you—you have discovered everything. You only said 'I have been at Browndown'—and I heard it in your voice. Out with it! out with it!"

She never moved—she seemed hardly to breathe—while I was telling her all that had

passed at the interview between Oscar and me. As soon as I had done, she got up in a violent hurry—flushed and eager—and made straight for her bed-room door.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I want my hat and my stick," she answered.

"You are going out?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Can you ask the question? To Browndown of course!"

I begged her to wait a moment, and hear a word or two that I had to say. It is, I suppose, almost needless to add that my object in speaking to her was to protest against the glaring impropriety of her paying a second visit, in one day, to a man who was a stranger to her. I declared, in the plainest terms, that such a proceeding would be sufficient, in the estimation of any civilised community, to put her reputation in peril. The result of my interference was curious and interesting in the extreme. It showed me that the virtue called Modesty (I am not speaking of Decency, mind) is a virtue of purely artificial growth;

and that the successful cultivation of it depends in the first instance, not on the influence of the tongue, but on the influence of the eye.

Suppose the case of an average young lady (conscious of feeling a first love) to whom I might have spoken in the sense that I have just mentioned—what would she have done?

She would assuredly have shown some natural and pretty confusion, and would, in all human probability, have changed colour more or less while she was listening to me. Lucilla's charming face revealed but one expression—an expression of disappointment, slightly mixed perhaps with surprise. I believed her to be then, what I knew her to be afterwards, as pure a creature as ever walked the earth. And yet, of the natural and becoming confusion, of the little inevitable feminine changes of colour which I had expected to see, not so much as a vestige appeared—and this, remember, in the case of a person of unusually sensitive and impulsive nature: quick, on the most trifling occasions, to feel and to express its feeling in no ordinary degree.

What did it mean?

It meant that here was one strange side shown to me of the terrible affliction that darkened her life. It meant that modesty is essentially the growth of our own consciousness of the eyes of others judging us—and that blindness is never bashful, for the one simple reason that blindness cannot see. The most modest girl in existence is bolder with her lover in the dark than in the light. The female model who "sits" for the first time in a drawing academy, and who shrinks from the ordeal, is persuaded, in the last resort, to enter the students' room by having a bandage bound over her eyes. My poor Lucilla had always the bandage over her eyes. My poor Lucilla was never to meet her lover in the light. She had grown up with the passions of a woman—and yet, she had never advanced beyond the fearless and primitive innocence of a child. Ah, if ever there was a sacred charge confided to any mortal creature, here surely was a sacred charge confided to Me! I could not endure to see the poor pretty blind face turned so insensibly towards mine, after such words as I had just said to her. She was standing within my reach. I took her by the arm, and made her

sit on my knee. "My dear!" I said, very earnestly, "you must *not* go to him again to-day."

"I have got so much to say to him," she answered impatiently. "I want to tell him how deeply I feel for him, and how anxious I am to make his life a happier one if I can."

"My dear Lucilla! you can't say this to a young man. It is as good as telling him, in plain words, that you are fond of him!"

"I *am* fond of him."

"Hush! hush! Keep it to yourself, until you are sure that *he* is fond of *you*. It is the man's place, my love—not the woman's—to own the truth first in matters of this sort."

"That is very hard on the women. If they feel it first, they ought to own it first." She paused for a moment, considering with herself—and abruptly got off my knee. "I *must* speak to him!" she burst out. "I *must* tell him that I have heard his story, and that I think all the better of him after it, instead of the worse!"

She was again on her way to get her hat. My only chance of stopping her was to invent a compromise.

"Write him a note," I said—and then sud-

denly remembered that she was blind. "You shall dictate," I added; "and I will hold the pen. Be content with that for to-day. For my sake, Lucilla!"

She yielded—not very willingly, poor thing. But she jealously declined to let me hold the pen.

"My first note to him must be all written by *me*," she said. "I can write—in my own roundabout way. It's long and tiresome; but still I can do it. Come, and see."

She led the way to a writing-table in a corner of the room, and sat for awhile with the pen in her hand, thinking. Her irresistible smile broke suddenly like a glow of light over her face. "Ah!" she exclaimed, "I know how to tell him what I think!"

Guiding the pen in her right hand with the fingers of her left hand, she wrote slowly, in large childish characters, these words:—

"DEAR MR. OSCAR,—I have heard all about you. Please send me the little gold vase.—Your friend, LUCILLA."

She enclosed and directed the letter, and clapped her hands for joy. "He will know what *that* means!" she said gaily.

It was useless to attempt making a second remonstrance. I rang the bell, under protest (imagine her receiving a present from a gentleman to whom she had spoken for the first time that morning!)—and the groom was sent off to Browndown with the letter. In making this concession, I privately said to myself, "I shall keep a tight hand over Oscar; he is the manageable person of the two!"

The interval before the return of the groom was not an easy interval to fill up. I proposed some music. Lucilla was still too full of her new interest to be able to give her attention to anything else. She suddenly remembered that her father and her step-mother ought both to be informed that Mr. Dubourg was a perfectly presentable person at the rectory: she decided on writing to her father.

On this occasion, she made no difficulty about permitting me to hold the pen, while she told me what to write. We produced between us rather a flighty, enthusiastic, high-flown sort of letter. I felt by no means sure that we should raise a favourable impression of our new neighbour in the mind of Reverend Finch. That was, however, not my affair. I

appeared to excellent advantage in the matter, as the judicious foreign lady who had insisted on making inquiries. For the rest, it was a point of honour with me—writing for a person who was blind—not to change a single word in the sentences which Lucilla dictated to me. The letter completed, I wrote the address of the house in Brighton at which Mr. Finch then happened to be staying; and I was next about to close the envelope in due course—when Lucilla stopped me.

"Wait a little," she said. "Don't close the letter yet."

I wondered why the envelope was to be left open, and why Lucilla looked a little confused when she forbade me to close it. Another unexpected revelation of the influence of their affliction on the natures of the blind, was waiting to enlighten me on those two points.

After consultation between us, it had been decided, at Lucilla's express request, that I should inform Mrs. Finch that the mystery at Browndown was now cleared up. Lucilla openly owned to having no great relish for the society of her step-mother, or for the duty invariably devolving on anybody who was long

in the company of that fertile lady, of either finding her handkerchief or holding her baby. A duplicate key of the door of communication between the two sides of the house was given to me; and I left the room.

Before performing my errand, I went for a minute into my bedchamber to put away my hat and parasol. Returning into the corridor, and passing the door of the sitting-room, I found that it had been left ajar by some one who had entered after I had left; and I heard Lucilla's voice say, "Take that letter out of the envelope, and read it to me."

I pursued my way along the passage—very slowly, I own—and I heard the first sentences of the letter which I had written under Lucilla's dictation, read aloud to her in the old nurse's voice. The incurable suspicion of the blind—always abandoned to the same melancholy distrust of the persons about them; always doubting whether some deceit is not being practised on them by the happy people who can see—had urged Lucilla, even in the trifling matter of the letter, to put me to the test, behind my back. She was using Zillah's eyes to make sure that I had really written all

that she had dictated to me—exactly as, on many an after occasion, she used my eyes to make sure of Zillah's complete performance of tasks allotted to her in the house. No experience of the faithful devotion of those who live with them ever thoroughly satisfies the blind. Ah, poor things, always in the dark! always in the dark!

In opening the door of communication, it appeared as if I had also opened all the doors of all the bedchambers in the rectory. The moment I stepped into the passage, out popped the children from one room after another, like rabbits out of their burrows.

"Where is your mamma?" I asked.

The rabbits answered by one universal shriek, and popped back again into their burrows.

I went down the stairs to try my luck on the ground floor. The window on the landing had a view over the front garden. I looked out, and saw the irrepressible Arab of the family, our small chubby Jicks, wandering in the garden, all by herself; evidently on the watch for her next opportunity of escaping from the house. This curious little creature

cared nothing for the society of the other children. Indoors, she sat gravely retired in corners, taking her meals (whenever she could) on the floor. Out of doors, she roamed till she could walk no longer, and then lay down anywhere, like a little animal, to sleep. She happened to look up as I stood at the window. Seeing me, she waved her hand indicatively in the direction of the rectory gate. "What is it?" I asked. The Arab answered, "Jicks wants to get out."

At the same moment, the screaming of a baby below, informed me that I was in the near neighbourhood of Mrs. Finch.

I advanced towards the noise, and found myself standing before the open door of a large storeroom at the extreme end of the passage. In the middle of the room (issuing household commodities to the cook) sat Mrs. Finch. She was robed this time in a petticoat and a shawl; and she had the baby and the novel laid together flat on their backs in her lap.

"Eight pounds of soap? Where does it all go to I wonder!" groaned Mrs. Finch to the accompaniment of the baby's screams. "Five pounds of soda for the laundry? One would

think we did the washing for the whole village. Six pounds of candles? You must eat candles, like the Russians: who ever heard of burning six pounds of candles in a week? Ten pounds of sugar? Who gets it all? I never taste sugar from one year's end to another. Waste, nothing but waste." Here Mrs. Finch looked my way, and saw me at the door. "Oh? Madame Pratolungo? How d'ye do? Don't go away—I've just done. A bottle of blacking? My shoes are a disgrace to the house. Five pounds of rice? If I had Indian servants, five pounds of rice would last them for a year. There! take the things away into the kitchen. Excuse my dress, Madame Pratolungo. How *am* I to dress, with all I have got to do? What do you say? My time must indeed be fully occupied? Ah, that's just where it is! When you have lost half an hour in the morning, and can't pick it up again—to say nothing of having the storeroom on your mind, and the children's dinner late, and the baby fractious—one slips on a petticoat and a shawl, and gives it up in despair. What *can* I have done with my handkerchief? Would you mind looking

among those bottles behind you? Oh, here it is, under the baby. Might I trouble you to hold my book for one moment? I think the baby will be quieter if I put him the other way." Here Mrs. Finch turned the baby over on his stomach, and patted him briskly on the back. At this change in his circumstances, the unappeasable infant only roared louder than ever. His mother appeared to be perfectly unaffected by the noise. This resigned domestic martyr looked placidly up at me, as I stood before her, bewildered, with the novel in my hand. "Ah, that's a very interesting story," she went on. "Plenty of love in it, you know. You have come for it, haven't you? I remember I promised to lend it to you yesterday." Before I could answer, the cook appeared again, in search of more household commodities. Mrs. Finch repeated the woman's demands, one by one as she made them, in tones of despair. "Another bottle of vinegar? I believe you water the garden with vinegar! More starch? The Queen's washing, I'm firmly persuaded, doesn't come to so much as ours. Sandpaper? Sandpaper means wastepaper in this profligate house. I

shall tell your master. I really *can* NOT make the housekeeping money last at this rate. Don't go, Madame Pratolungo! I shall have done directly. What? You must go? Oh, then, put the book back on my lap, please—and look behind that sack of flour. The first volume slipped down there this morning, and I haven't had time to pick it up since. (Sandpaper! Do you think I'm made of sandpaper?) Have you found the first volume? Ah, that's it. All over flour! there's a hole in the sack, I suppose. Twelve sheets of sandpaper used in a week! What for? I defy any of you to tell me what for. Waste! waste! shameful sinful waste!" At this point in Mrs. Finch's lamentations, I made my escape with the book, and left the subject of Oscar Dubourg to be introduced at a fitter opportunity. The last words I heard, through the screams of the baby, as I ascended the stairs, were words still relating to the week's prodigal consumption of sandpaper. Let us drop a tear, if you please, over the woes of Mrs. Finch, and leave the British matron apostrophising domestic economy in the odorous seclusion of her own storeroom.

I had just related to Lucilla the failure of my expedition to the other side of the house, when the groom returned, bringing with him the gold vase, and a letter.

Oscar's answer was judiciously modelled to imitate the brevity of Lucilla's note. "You have made me a happy man again. When may I follow the vase?" There, in two sentences, was the whole letter.

I had another discussion with Lucilla, relating to the propriety of our receiving Oscar in Reverend Finch's absence. It was only possible to persuade her to wait until she had at least heard from her father, by consenting to take another walk towards Browndown the next morning. This new concession satisfied her. She had received his present; she had exchanged letters with him—that was enough to content her for the time.

"Do you think he is getting fond of me?" she asked, the last thing at night; taking her gold vase to bed with her, poor dear—exactly as she might have taken a new toy to bed with her when she was a child. "Give him time, my love," I answered. "It isn't everybody who can travel at your pace in such a

serious matter as this." My banter had no effect upon her. "Go away with your candle," she said. "The darkness makes no difference to *me*. I can see him in my thoughts." She nestled her head comfortably on the pillows, and tapped me saucily on the cheek, as I bent over her. "Own the advantage I have over you now," she said. "*You* can't see at night, without your candle. *I* could go all over the house, at this moment, without making a false step anywhere."

When I left her that night, I sincerely believe "poor Miss Finch" was the happiest woman in England.

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH.

MR. FINCH SMELLS MONEY.

A DOMESTIC alarm deferred for some hours our proposed walk to Browndown.

The old nurse, Zillah, was taken ill in the night. She was so little relieved by such remedies as we were able to apply, that it became necessary to summon the doctor in the morning. He lived at some distance from Dimchurch; and he had to send back to his own house for the medicines required. As a necessary result of these delays, it was close on one o'clock in the afternoon before the medical remedies had their effect, and the nurse was sufficiently recovered to permit of our leaving her in the servants' care.

We had dressed for our walk (Lucilla being

ready long before I was), and had got as far as the garden gate on our way to Browndown —when we heard, on the other side of the wall, a man's voice, pitched in superbly deep bass tones, pronouncing these words :

" Believe me, my dear sir, there is not the least difficulty. I have only to send the cheque to my bankers at Brighton."

Lucilla started, and caught hold of me by the arm.

" My father !" she exclaimed, in the utmost astonishment. " Who is he talking to ?"

The key of the gate was in my possession. " What a grand voice your father has got !" I said, as I took the key out of my pocket. I opened the gate. There, confronting us on the threshold, arm in arm, as if they had known each other from childhood, stood Lucilla's father, and—Oscar Dubourg !

Reverend Finch opened the proceedings by folding his daughter affectionately in his arms.

" My dear child !" he said, " I received your letter—your most interesting letter—this morning. The moment I read it I felt that I owed a duty to Mr. Dubourg. As pastor of

Dimchurch, it was clearly incumbent on me to comfort a brother in affliction. I really felt, so to speak, a longing to hold out the right hand of friendship to this sorely-tried man. I borrowed my friend's carriage, and drove straight to Browndown. We have had a long and cordial talk. I have brought Mr. Dubourg home with me. He must be one of us. My dear child, Mr. Dubourg must be one of us. Let me introduce you. My eldest daughter—Mr. Dubourg."

He performed the ceremony of presentation, with the most impenetrable gravity, as if he really believed that Oscar and his daughter now met each other for the first time!

Never had I set my eyes on a meaner-looking man than this rector. In height he barely reached up to my shoulder. In substance, he was so miserably lean that he looked the living picture of starvation. He would have made his fortune in the streets of London, if he had only gone out and shown himself to the public in ragged clothes. His face was deeply pitted with the small-pox. His short grisly hair stood up stiff and straight on his head like hair fixed in a broom. His

small whitish-grey eyes had a restless, inquisitive, hungry look in them, indescribably irritating and uncomfortable to see. The one personal distinction he possessed consisted in his magnificent bass voice—a voice which had no sort of right to exist in the person who used it. Until one became accustomed to the contrast, there was something perfectly unbearable in hearing those superb big tones come out of that contemptible little body. The famous Latin phrase conveys, after all, the best description I can give of Reverend Finch. He was in very truth—Voice, and nothing else.

"Madame Pratolungo, no doubt?" he went on, turning to me. "Delighted to make the acquaintance of my daughter's judicious companion and friend. You must be one of us—like Mr. Dubourg. Let me introduce you. Madame Pratolungo—Mr. Dubourg. This is the old side of the rectory, my dear sir. We had it put in repair—let me see: how long since?—we had it put in repair just after Mrs. Finch's last confinement but one." (I soon discovered that Mr. Finch reckoned time by his wife's confinements.) "You will find it

very curious and interesting inside. Lucilla. my child! (It has pleased Providence, Mr, Dubourg, to afflict my daughter with blindness. Inscrutable Providence!) Lucilla, this is your side of the house. Take Mr. Dubourg's arm, and lead the way. Do the honours, my child. Madame Pratolungo, let me offer you my arm. I regret that I was not present, when you arrived, to welcome you at the rectory. Consider yourself—do pray consider yourself—one of us." He stopped, and lowered his prodigious voice to a confidential growl. "Delightful person, Mr. Dubourg. I can't tell you how pleased I am with him. And what a sad story! Cultivate Mr. Dubourg, my dear madam. As a favour to Me—cultivate Mr. Dubourg!"

He said this with an appearance of the deepest anxiety—and more, he emphasised it by affectionately squeezing my hand.

I have met with a great many audacious people in my time. But the audacity of Reverend Finch—persisting to our faces in the assumption that he had been the first to discover our neighbour, and that Lucilla and I were perfectly incapable of understanding

and appreciating Oscar, unassisted by *him*—was entirely without a parallel in my experience. I asked myself what his conduct in this matter—so entirely unexpected by Lucilla, as well as by me—could possibly mean. My knowledge of his character, obtained through his daughter, and my memory of what we had heard him say on the other side of the wall, suggested that his conduct might mean—Money.

We assembled in the sitting-room.

The only person among us who was quite at his ease was Mr. Finch. He never let his daughter and his guest alone for a single moment. "My child, show Mr. Dubourg this; show Mr. Dubourg that. Mr. Dubourg, my daughter possesses this; my daughter possesses that." So he went on, all round the room. Oscar appeared to feel a little daunted by the overwhelming attentions of his new friend. Lucilla was, as I could see, secretly irritated at finding herself authorised by her father to pay those attentions to Oscar which she would have preferred offering to him of her own accord. As for me, I was already beginning to weary of the patronising

politeness of the little priest with the big voice. It was a relief to us all, when a message on domestic affairs arrived in the midst of the proceedings from Mrs. Finch, requesting to see her husband immediately on the rectory side of the house.

Forced to leave us, Reverend Finch made his farewell speech; taking Oscar's hand into a kind of paternal custody in both his own hands. He spoke with such sonorous cordiality, that the china and glass ornaments on Lucilla's cheffonier actually jingled an accompaniment to his booming bass notes.

"Come to tea, my dear sir. Without ceremony. To-night at six. We must keep up your spirits, Mr. Dubourg. Cheerful society, and a little music. Lucilla, my dear child, you will play for Mr. Dubourg, won't you? Madame Pratolungo will do the same —at My request—I am sure. We shall make even dull Dimchurch agreeable to our new neighbour before we have done. What does the poet say? 'Fixed to no spot is happiness sincere; 'tis nowhere to be found, or everywhere.' How cheering! how true! Good day; good day."

The glasses left off jingling. Mr. Finch's wizen little legs took him out of the room.

The moment his back was turned, we both assailed Oscar with the same question. What had passed at the interview between the rector and himself?

Men are all alike incompetent to satisfy women, when the question between the sexes is a question of small details. A woman, in Oscar's position, would have been able to relate to us, not only the whole conversation with the rector, but every little trifling incident which had noticeably illustrated it. As things were, we could only extract from our unsatisfactory man the barest outline of the interview. The colouring and the filling-in we were left to do for ourselves.

Oscar had, on his own confession, acknowledged his visitor's kindness, by opening his whole heart to the sympathising rector, and placing that wary priest and excellent man of business in possession of the completest knowledge of all his affairs. In return, Reverend Finch had spoken in the frankest manner, on his side. He had drawn a sad picture of the poverty-stricken condition of Dimchurch,

viewed as an ecclesiastical endowment; and he had spoken in such feeling terms of the neglected condition of the ancient and interesting church, that poor simple Oscar, smitten with pity, had produced his cheque-book, and had subscribed on the spot towards the Fund for repairing the ancient round tower. They had been still occupied with the subject of the tower and the subscription, when we had opened the garden gate and had let them in. Hearing this, I now understood the motives under which our reverend friend was acting as well as if they had been my own. It was plain to my mind that the rector had taken his financial measure of Oscar, and had privately satisfied himself, that if he encouraged the two young people in cultivating each other's society, money (to use his own phrase) might come of it. He had, as I believed, put forward "the round tower," in the first instance, as a feeler; and he would follow it up, in due time, by an appeal of a more personal nature to Oscar's well-filled purse. Brief, he was, in my opinion, quite sharp enough (after having studied his young friend's character) to foresee an addition to

his income, rather than a subtraction from it, if the relations between Oscar and his daughter ended in a marriage.

Whether Lucilla arrived, on her side, at the same conclusion as mine, is what I cannot venture positively to declare. I can only relate that she looked ill at ease as the facts came out; and that she took the first opportunity of extinguishing her father, viewed as a topic of conversation.

As for Oscar, it was enough for him that he had already secured his place as friend of the house. He took leave of us in the highest spirits. I had my eye on them when he and Lucilla said good-bye. She squeezed his hand. I saw her do it. At the rate at which things were now going on, I began to ask myself whether Reverend Finch would not appear at tea-time in his robes of office, and celebrate the marriage of his "sorely-tried" young friend between the first cup and the second.

At our little social assembly in the evening, nothing passed worthy of much remark.

Lucilla and I (I cannot resist recording this) were both beautifully dressed, in honour

of the occasion; Mrs. Finch serving us to perfection, by way of contrast. She had made an immense effort—she was half dressed. Her evening costume was an ancient green silk skirt (with traces of past babies visible on it to an experienced eye); topped by the everlasting blue merino jacket. "I lose everything belonging to me," Mrs. Finch whispered in my ear. "I have got a body to this dress, and it can't be found anywhere." The rector's prodigious voice was never silent: the pompous and plausible little man talked, talked, talked, in deeper and deeper bass, until the very tea-cups on the table shuddered under the influence of him. The elder children, admitted to the family festival, ate till they could eat no more; stared till they could stare no more; yawned till they could yawn no more—and then went to bed. Oscar got on well with everybody. Mrs. Finch was naturally interested in him as one of twins—though she was also surprised and disappointed at hearing that his mother had begun and ended with his brother and himself. As for Lucilla, she sat in silent happiness, absorbed in the inexhaustible delight of hearing

Oscar's voice. She found as many varieties of expression in listening to her beloved tones, as the rest of us find in looking at our beloved face. We had music later in the evening—and I then heard, for the first time, how charmingly Lucilla played. She was a born musician, with a delicacy and subtlety of touch such as few even of the greatest *virtuosi* possess. Oscar was enchanted. In a word, the evening was a success.

I contrived, when our guest took his departure, to say my contemplated word to him in private, on the subject of his solitary position at Browndown.

Those doubts of Oscar's security, in his lonely house, which I have described as having been suggested to me by the discovery of the two ruffians lurking under the wall, still maintained their place in my mind; and still urged me to warn him to take precautions of some sort, before the precious metals which he had sent to London to be melted, came back to him again. He gave me the opportunity I wanted, by looking at his watch, and apologising for protracting his visit to a terribly late hour, for the country—the hour of midnight.

"Is your servant sitting up for you?" I asked—assuming to be ignorant of his domestic arrangements.

He pulled out of his pocket a great clumsy key.

"This is my only servant at Browndown," he said. "By four or five in the afternoon, the people at the inn have done all for me that I want. After that time, there is nobody in the house but myself."

He shook hands with us. The rector escorted him as far as the front door. I slipped out while they were saying their last words, and joined Oscar, when he advanced alone into the garden.

"I want a breath of fresh air," I said. "I'll go with you as far as the gate."

He began to talk of Lucilla directly. I surprised him by returning abruptly to the subject of his position at Browndown.

"Do you think it's wise," I asked, "to be all by yourself at night in such a lonely house as yours? Why don't you have a man-servant?"

"I detest strange servants," he answered. "I infinitely prefer being by myself."

"When do you expect your gold and silver plates to be returned to you?"

"In about a week."

"What would be the value of them, in money—at a rough guess?"

"At a rough guess—about seventy or eighty pounds."

"In a week's time then," I said, "you will have seventy or eighty pounds' worth of property at Browndown. Property which a thief need only put into the melting-pot, to have no fear of its being traced into his hands."

Oscar stopped, and looked at me.

"What *can* you be thinking of!" he asked. "There are no thieves in this primitive place."

"There are thieves in other places," I answered. "And they may come here. Have you forgotten those two men whom we caught hanging about Browndown yesterday?"

He smiled. I had recalled to him a humorous association—nothing more.

"It was not we who caught them," he said. "It was that strange child. What do you say to my having Jicks to sleep in the house and take care of me?"

"I am not joking," I rejoined. "I never met with two more ill-looking villains in my life. The window was open when you were telling me about the necessity for melting the plates again. They may know as well as we do, that your gold and silver will be returned to you after a time."

"What an imagination you have got!" he exclaimed. "You see a couple of shabby excursionists from Brighton, who have wandered to Dimchurch—and you instantly transform them into a pair of housebreakers in a conspiracy to rob and murder me! You and my brother Nugent would just suit each other. His imagination runs away with him, exactly like yours."

"Take my advice," I answered gravely. "Don't persist in sleeping at Browndown without a living creature in the house with you."

He was in wild good spirits. He kissed my hand, and thanked me in his voluble exaggerated way for the interest that I took in him. "All right!" he said, as he opened the gate. "I'll have a living creature in the house with me. I'll get a dog."

We parted. I had told him what was on my mind. I could do no more. After all, it might be quite possible that his view was the right one, and mine the wrong.

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH.

SECOND APPEARANCE OF JICKS.

FIVE more days passed.

During that interval, we saw our new neighbour constantly. Either Oscar came to the rectory, or we went to Browndown. Reverend Finch waited, with a masterly assumption of suspecting nothing, until the relations between the two young people were ripe enough to develope into relations of acknowledged love. They were already (under Lucilla's influence) advancing rapidly to that point. You are not to blame my poor blind girl, if you please, for frankly encouraging the man she loved. He was the most backward man—viewed as a suitor—whom I ever met with. The fonder he grew of her, the more timid and self-

distrustful he became. I own I don't like a modest man; and I cannot honestly say that Mr. Oscar Dubourg, on closer acquaintance, advanced himself much in my estimation. However, Lucilla understood him, and that was enough. She was determined to have the completest possible image of him in her mind. Everybody in the house who had seen him (the children included) she examined and cross-examined on the subject of his personal appearance, as she had already examined and cross-examined me. His features and his colour, his height and his breadth; his ornaments and his clothes—on all these points she collected evidence, in every direction and in the smallest detail. It was an especial relief and delight to her to hear, on all sides, that his complexion was fair. There was no reasoning with her against her blind horror of dark shades of colour, whether seen in men, women, or things. She was quite unable to account for it; she could only declare it.

"I have the strangest instincts of my own about some things," she said to me one day. "For instance, I knew that Oscar was bright and fair—I mean I felt it in myself—on that

delightful evening when I first heard the sound of his voice. It went straight from my ear to my heart; and it described him, just as the rest of you have described him to me since. Mrs. Finch tells me his complexion is lighter than mine. Do you think so too? I am so glad to hear that he is fairer than I am! Did you ever meet before with a person like me? I have the oddest ideas in this blind head of mine. I associate life and beauty with light colours, and death and crime with dark colours. If I married a man with a dark complexion, and if I recovered my sight afterwards, I should run away from him."

This singular prejudice of hers against dark people was a little annoying to me, on personal grounds. It was a sort of reflection on my own taste. Between ourselves, the late Doctor Pratolungo was of a fine mahogany brown all over.

As for affairs in general at Dimchurch, my chronicle of the five days finds little to dwell on that is worth recording.

We were not startled by any second appearance of the two ruffians at Browndown—neither was any change made by Oscar in his

domestic establishment. He was favoured with more than one visit from our little wandering Jicks. On each occasion, the child gravely reminded him of his rash promise to appeal to the police, and visit with corporal punishment the two ugly strangers who had laughed at her. When were the men to be beaten? and when was Jicks to see it? Such were the serious questions with which this young lady regularly opened the proceedings, on each occasion when she favoured Oscar with a morning call.

On the sixth day, the gold and silver plates were returned to Browndown from the manufactory in London.

The next morning, a note arrived for me from Oscar. It ran thus :—

"DEAR MADAME PRATOLUNGO,—I regret to inform you that nothing happened to me last night. My locks and bolts are in their usual good order; my gold and silver plates are safe in the workshop : and I myself am now eating my breakfast with an uncut throat.—Yours ever, "OSCAR."

After this, there was no more to be said. Jicks might persist in remembering the two ill-looking strangers. Older and wiser people

dismissed them from all further consideration.

Saturday came—making the tenth day since the memorable morning when I had forced Oscar to disclose himself to me in the little side-room at Browndown.

In the forenoon we had a visit from him at the rectory. In the afternoon we went to Browndown, to see him begin a new piece of chasing in gold—a casket for holding gloves—destined to take its place on Lucilla's toilet-table when it was done. We left him industriously at work; determined to go on as long as the daylight lasted.

Early in the evening, Lucilla sat down at her pianoforte; and I paid a visit by appointment to the rectory side of the house.

Unhappy Mrs. Finch had determined to institute a complete reform of her wardrobe. She had entreated me to give her the benefit of "my French taste," in the capacity of confidential critic and adviser. "I can't afford to buy any new things," said the poor lady. "But a deal might be done in altering what I have got by me, if a clever person took the matter up." Who could resist that piteous

appeal? I resigned myself to the baby, the novel, and the children in general; and (Reverend Finch being out of the way, writing his sermon) I presented myself in Mrs. Finch's parlour, full of ideas, with my scissors and my pattern-paper ready in my hand.

We had only begun our operations, when one of the elder children arrived with a message from the nursery.

It was tea-time; and, as usual, Jicks was missing. She was searched for, first in the lower regions of the house; secondly in the garden. Not a trace of her was to be discovered in either quarter. Nobody was surprised or alarmed. We said, "Oh, dear, she has gone to Browndown again!"—and immersed ourselves once more in the shabby recesses of Mrs. Finch's wardrobe.

I had just decided that the blue merino jacket was an article of wearing apparel which had done its duty, and earned its right to final retirement from the scene—when a plaintive cry reached my ear, through the open door which led into the back garden.

I stopped, and looked at Mrs. Finch.

The cry was repeated—louder and nearer:

recognisable this time as a cry in a child's voice. The door of the room had been left ajar, when we sent the messenger back to the nursery. I threw it open, and found myself face to face with Jicks in the passage.

I felt every nerve in my body shudder at the sight of the child.

The poor little thing was white and wild with terror. She was incapable of uttering a word. When I knelt down to fondle and soothe her, she caught convulsively at my hand, and attempted to raise me. I got on my feet again. She repeated her dumb cry more loudly—and tried to drag me out of the house. She was so weak that she staggered under the effort. I took her up in my arms. One of my hands, as I embraced her, touched the top of her frock, just below the back of her neck. I felt something on my fingers. I looked at them. Gracious God! I was stained with blood!

I turned the child round. My own blood froze. Her mother, standing behind me, screamed with horror.

The dear little thing's white frock was spotted and splashed with wet blood. Not

her own blood. There was not a scratch on her. I looked closer at the horrid marks. They had been drawn purposely on her—drawn, as it seemed, with a finger. I took her out into the light. It was writing! A word had been feebly traced on the back of her frock. I made out something like the letter "H." Then a letter which it was impossible to read. Then another next to it, which might have been "L," or might have been "J." Then a last letter which I guessed to be "P."

Was the word—"Help"?

Yes!—traced on the back of the child's frock, with a finger dipped in blood—"HELP."

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH.

DISCOVERIES AT BROWNDOWN.

IT is needless to tell you at what conclusion I arrived, as soon as I was sufficiently myself to think at all.

Thanks to my adventurous past life, I have got the habit of deciding quickly in serious emergencies of all sorts. In the present emergency—as I saw it—there were two things to be done. One, to go instantly with help to Browndown: the other, to keep the knowledge—what had happened from Lucilla until I could get back again, and prepare her for the discovery.

I looked at Mrs. Finch. She had dropped helplessly into a chair. "Rouse yourself!" I said—and shook her. It was no time for sym-

pathising with swoons and hysterics. The child was still in my arms; fast yielding, poor little thing, to the exhaustion of fatigue and terror. I could do nothing until I had relieved myself of the charge of her. Mrs. Finch looked up at me, trembling and sobbing. I put the child in her lap. Jicks feebly resisted being parted from me; but soon gave up, and dropped her weary little head on her mother's bosom. "Can you take off her frock?" I asked, with another shake—a good one, this time.

The prospect of a domestic occupation (of any sort) appeared to rouse Mrs. Finch. She looked at the baby, in its cradle in one corner of the room, and at the novel, reposing on a chair in another corner of the room. The presence of these two familiar objects appeared to encourage her. She shivered, she swallowed a sob, she recovered her breath, she began to undo the frock.

"Put it away carefully," I said; "and say nothing to anybody of what has happened, until I come back. You can see for yourself that the child is not hurt. Soothe her, and wait here. Is Mr. Finch in the study?"

Mrs. Finch swallowed another sob, and said,

"Yes." The child made a last effort. "Jicks will go with you," said the indomitable little Arab faintly. I ran out of the room, and left the three babies—big, little, and least—together.

After knocking at the study door without getting any reply, I opened it and went in. Reverend Finch, comfortably prostrate in a large arm-chair (with his sermon-paper spread out in fair white sheets by his side), started up, and confronted me in the character of a clergyman that moment awakened from a sound sleep.

The rector of Dimchurch instantly recovered his dignity.

"I beg your pardon, Madame Pratolungo, I was deep in thought. Please state your business briefly." Saying those words, he waved his hand magnificently over his empty sheets of paper, and added in his deepest bass: "Sermon-day."

I told him in the plainest words what I had seen on his child's frock, and what I feared had happened at Browndown. He turned deadly pale. If I ever yet set my two eyes on a man thoroughly frightened, Reverend Finch was that man.

"Do you anticipate danger?" he inquired. "Is it your opinion that criminal persons are in, or near, the house?"

"It is my opinion that there is not a moment to be lost," I answered. "We must go to Browndown; and we must get what help we can on the way."

I opened the door, and waited for him to come out with me. Mr. Finch (still apparently pre-occupied with the question of the criminal persons) looked as if he wished himself a hundred miles from his own rectory at that particular moment. But he was the master of the house; he was the principal man in the place—he had no other alternative, as matters now stood, than to take his hat and go.

We went out together into the village. My reverend companion was silent for the first time in my limited experience of him. We inquired for the one policeman who patrolled the district. He was away on his rounds. We asked if anybody had seen the doctor. No: it was not the doctor's day for visiting Dimchurch. I had heard the landlord of the Cross Hands described as a capable and respectable man; and I suggested stopping at

the inn, and taking him with us. Mr. Finch instantly brightened at that proposal. His sense of his own importance rose again, like the mercury in a thermometer when you put it into a warm bath.

"Exactly what I was about to suggest," he said. "Gootheridge of the Cross Hands is a very worthy person—for his station in life. Let us have Gootheridge, by all means. Don't be alarmed, Madame Pratolungo. We are all in the hands of Providence. It is most fortunate for you that I was at home. What would you have done without me? Now don't, pray don't, be alarmed. In case of criminal persons—I have my stick, as you see. I am not tall; but I possess immense physical strength. I am, so to speak, all muscle. Feel!"

He held out one of his wizen little arms. It was about half the size of my arm. If I had not been far too anxious to think of playing tricks, I should certainly have declared that it was needless, with such a tower of strength by my side, to disturb the landlord. I dare not assert that Mr. Finch actually detected the turn my thoughts were taking—I can only declare that he did certainly shout for Goothe-

ridge in a violent hurry, the moment we were in sight of the inn.

The landlord came out; and, hearing what our errand was, instantly consented to join us.

"Take your gun," said Mr. Finch.

Gootheridge took his gun. We hastened on to the house.

"Were Mrs. Gootheridge or your daughter at Browndown to-day?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am—they were both at Browndown. They finished up their work as usual—and left the house more than an hour since."

"Did anything out of the common happen while they were there?"

"Nothing that I heard of, ma'am."

I considered with myself for a minute, and ventured on putting a few more questions to Mr. Gootheridge.

"Have any strangers been seen here this evening?" I inquired.

"Yes, ma'am. Nearly an hour ago two strangers drove by my house in a chaise."

"In what direction?"

"Coming from Brighton way, and going towards Browndown."

"Did you notice the men?"

"Not particularly, ma'am. I was busy at the time."

A sickening suspicion that the two strangers in the chaise might be the two men whom I had seen lurking under the wall, forced its way into my mind. I said no more until we reached the house.

All was quiet. The one sign of anything unusual was in the plain traces of the passage of wheels over the turf in front of Browndown. The landlord was the first to see them. "The chaise must have stopped at the house, sir," he said, addressing himself to the rector.

Reverend Finch was suffering under a second suspension of speech. All he could say as we approached the door of the silent and solitary building—and he said *that* with extreme difficulty—was, "Pray let us be careful!"

The landlord was the first to reach the door. I was behind him. The rector—at some little distance—acted as rear-guard, with the South Downs behind him to retreat upon. Gootheridge rapped smartly on the door, and called out, "Mr. Dubourg!" There was no

answer. There was only a dreadful silence. The suspense was more than I could endure. I pushed by the landlord, and turned the handle of the unlocked door.

"Let me go first, ma'am," said Gootheridge.

He pushed by me, in his turn. I followed him close. We entered the house, and called again. Again there was no answer. We looked into the little sitting-room on one side of the passage, and into the dining-room on the other. Both were empty. We went on to the back of the house, where the room was situated which Oscar called his workshop. When we tried the door of the workshop it was locked.

We knocked, and called again. The horrid silence was all that followed—as before.

I tried the keyhole with my finger. The key was not in the lock. I knelt down, and looked through the keyhole. The next instant, I was up again on my feet, wild and giddy with horror.

"Burst open the door!" I screamed. "I can just see his hand lying on the floor!"

The landlord, like the rector, was a little man; and the door, like everything else at

Browndown, was of the clumsiest and heaviest construction. Unaided by instruments, we should all three together have been too weak to burst it open. In this difficulty, Reverend Finch proved to be—for the first time, and also for the last—of some use.

"Stay!" he said. "My friends, if the back garden gate is open, we can get in by the window."

Neither the landlord nor I had thought of the window. We ran round to the back of the house; seeing the marks of the chaise-wheels leading in the same direction. The gate in the wall was wide open. We crossed the little garden. The window of the work-shop—opening to the ground—gave us admission as the rector had foretold. We entered the room.

There he lay—poor harmless, unlucky Oscar—senseless, in a pool of his own blood. A blow on the left side of his head had, to all appearance, felled him on the spot. The wound had split the scalp. Whether it had also split the skull was more than I was surgeon enough to be able to say. I had gathered some experience of how to deal

with wounded men, when I served the sacred cause of Freedom with my glorious Pratolungo. Cold water, vinegar, and linen for bandages—these were all in the house; and these I called for. Gootheridge found the key of the door flung aside in a corner of the room. He got the water and the vinegar, while I ran up-stairs to Oscar's bed-room, and provided myself with some of his handkerchiefs. In a few minutes, I had a cold water bandage over the wound, and was bathing his face in vinegar and water. He was still insensible; but he lived. Reverend Finch—not of the slightest help to anybody—assumed the duty of feeling Oscar's pulse. He did it as if, under the circumstances, this was the one meritorious action that could be performed. He looked as if nobody could feel a pulse but himself. "Most fortunate," he said, counting the slow, faint throbbing at the poor fellow's wrist—"most fortunate that I was at home. What would you have done without me?"

The next necessity was, of course, to send for the doctor, and to get help, in the meantime, to carry Oscar up-stairs to his bed.

Gootheridge volunteered to borrow a horse, and to ride off for the doctor. We arranged that he was to send his wife and his wife's brother to help me. This settled, the one last embarrassment left to deal with, was the embarrassment of Mr. Finch. Now that we were free from all fear of encountering bad characters in the house, the *boom-boom* of the little man's big voice went on unintermittingly, like a machine at work in the neighbourhood. I had another of my inspirations —sitting on the floor with Oscar's head on my lap. I gave my reverend companion something to do. "Look about the room!" I said. "See if the packing-case with the gold and silver plates is here or not."

Mr. Finch did not quite relish being treated like an ordinary mortal, and being told what he was to do.

"Compose yourself, Madame Pratolungo," he said. "No hysterical activity, if you please. This business is in My hands. Quite needless, ma'am, to tell Me to look for the packing-case."

"Quite needless," I agreed. "I know beforehand the packing-case is gone."

That answer instantly set him fussing about the room. Not a sign of the case was to be seen.

All doubt in my mind was at an end now. The two ruffians lounging against the wall had justified, horribly justified, my worst suspicions of them.

On the arrival of Mrs. Gootheridge and her brother, we carried him up to his room. We laid him on the bed, with his neck-tie off, and his throat free, and the air blowing over him from the open window. He showed no sign yet of coming to his senses. But still the pulse went faintly on. No change was discernible for the worse.

It was useless to hope for the doctor's arrival, before another hour at least. I felt the necessity of getting back at once to the rectory, so as to be able to tell Lucilla (with all needful preparation) the melancholy truth. Otherwise, the news of what had happened would get abroad in the village, and might come to her ears, in the worst possible way, through one of the servants. To my infinite relief, Mr. Finch, when I rose to go, excused himself from accompanying me. He had

discovered that it was his duty, as rector, to give the earliest information of the outrage at Browndown to the legal authorities. He went his way to the nearest magistrate. And I went mine—leaving Oscar under the care of Mrs. Gootheridge and her brother—back to the house. Mr. Finch's last words at parting reminded me, once more, that we had one thing at least to be thankful for under the circumstances—sad as they otherwise were.

"Most fortunate, Madame Pratolungo, that I was at home. What would you have done without me?"

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH.

EVENTS AT THE BEDSIDE.

I AM, if you will be so good as to remember, constitutionally French—and, therefore, constitutionally averse to distressing myself, if I can possibly help it. For this reason, I really cannot summon courage to describe what passed between my blind Lucilla and me when I returned to our pretty sitting-room. She made me cry at the time; and she would make me (and perhaps you) cry again now, if I wrote the little melancholy story of what this tender young creature suffered when I told her my miserable news. I won't write it! I am dead against tears. They affect the nose; and my nose is my best feature. Let us use our eyes, my fair friends, to conquer, not to cry.

Be it enough to say, that when I went back to Browndown, Lucilla went with me.

I now observed her, for the first time, to be jealous of the eyes of us happy people who could see. The instant she entered, she insisted on being near enough to the bed, to hear us, or to touch us, as we waited on the injured man. This was at once followed by her taking the place occupied by Mrs. Gootheridge at the bed-head, and herself bathing Oscar's face and forehead. She was even jealous of *me*, when she discovered that I was moistening the bandages on the wound. I irritated her into boldly kissing the poor insensible face in our presence! The landlady of the Cross Hands was one of my sort: she took cheerful views of things. "Sweet on him—eh, ma'am?" she whispered in my ear: "we shall have a wedding in Dimchurch." In presence of these kissings and whisperings, Mrs. Gootheridge's brother, as the only man present, began to look very uncomfortable. This worthy creature belonged to that large and respectable order of Englishmen, who don't know what to do with their hands, or how to get out of a room. I took pity on him

—he was, I assure you, a fine man. "Smoke your pipe, sir, in the garden," I said. "We will call to you from the window, if we want you up here." Mrs. Gootheridge's brother cast on me one look of unutterable gratitude —and escaped, as if he had been let out of a trap.

At last, the doctor came.

His first words were an indescribable relief to us. The skull of our poor Oscar was not injured. There was concussion of the brain, and there was a scalp-wound—inflicted evidently with a blunt instrument. As to the wound, I had done all that was necessary in the doctor's absence. As to the injury to the brain, time and care would put everything right again. "Make your minds easy, ladies," said this angel of a man. "There is no reason for feeling the slightest alarm about him."

He came to his senses—that is to say, he opened his eyes and looked vacantly about him—between four and five hours after the time when we had found him on the floor of the workshop.

His mind, poor fellow, was still all astray. He recognised nobody. He imitated the

action of writing with his finger; and said very earnestly, over and over again, "Go home, Jicks; go home, go home!" fancying himself, (as I suppose) lying helpless on the floor, and sending the child back to us to give the alarm. Later in the night he fell asleep. All through the next day, he still wandered in his mind when he spoke. It was not till the day after, that he began feebly to recover his reason. The first person he recognised was Lucilla. She was engaged at the moment in brushing his beautiful chestnut hair. To her unutterable joy, he patted her hand, and murmured her name. She bent over him; and, under cover of the hair-brush, whispered something in his ear which made the young fellow's pale face flush, and his dull eyes brighten with pleasure. A day or two afterwards, she owned to me that she had said, "Get well, for my sake." She was not in the least ashamed of having spoken to that plain purpose. On the contrary, she triumphed in it. "Leave him to me," said Lucilla, in the most positive manner. "I mean first to cure him. And then I mean to be his wife."

In a week more, he was in complete pos-

session of his faculties—but still wretchedly weak, and only gaining ground very slowly after the shock that he had suffered.

He was now able to tell us, by a little at a time, of what had happened in the workshop.

After Mrs. Gootheridge and her daughter had quitted the house at their usual hour, he had gone up to his room ; had remained there some little time ; and had then gone downstairs again. On approaching the workshop, he heard voices talking in whispers in the room. The idea instantly occurred to him that something was wrong. He softly tried the door, and found it locked—the robbers having no doubt taken that precaution, to prevent their being surprised at their thieving work by any person in the house. The one other way of getting into the room, was the way that we had tried. He went round to the back garden, and found an empty chaise drawn up outside the door. This circumstance thoroughly puzzled him. But for the mysterious locking of the workshop door, it would have suggested to him nothing more alarming than the arrival of some unexpected visitors. Eager to solve the mystery, he

crossed the garden; and, entering the room, found himself face to face with the same two men whom Jicks had discovered ten days previously lounging against the wall.

As he approached the window, they were both busily engaged, with their backs towards him, in cording up the packing-case which contained the metal plates.

They rose and faced him as he stepped into the room. The act of robbery which he found them coolly perpetrating in broad daylight, instantly set his irritable temper in a flame. He rushed at the younger of the two men—being the one nearest to him. The ruffian sprang aside out of his reach; snatched up from the table on which it was lying ready, a short loaded staff of leather called "a life-preserver;" and struck him with it on the head, before he had recovered himself, and could face his man once more.

From that moment, he remembered nothing, until he had regained his consciousness after the first shock of the blow.

He found himself lying, giddy and bleeding, on the floor; and he saw the child (who must have strayed into the room while he

was senseless) standing petrified with fear, looking at him. The idea of making use of her—as the only living being near—to give the alarm, came to him instinctively the moment he recognised her. He coaxed the little creature to venture within reach of his hand; and, dipping his finger in the blood that was flowing from him, sent us the terrible message which I had spelt out on the back of her frock. That done, he exerted his last remains of strength to push her gently towards the open window, and direct her to go home. He fainted from loss of blood, while he was still repeating the words, "Go home! go home!"—and still seeing, or fancying that he saw, the child stopping obstinately in the room, stupefied with terror. Of the time at which she found the courage and the sense to run home, and of all that had happened after that, he was necessarily ignorant. His next conscious impression was the impression, already recorded, of seeing Lucilla sitting by his bedside.

The account of the matter thus given by Oscar, was followed by a supplementary statement provided by the police.

The machinery of the law was put in action; and the village was kept in a fever of excitement for days together. Never was there a more complete investigation—and never was a poorer result achieved. Substantially, nothing was discovered beyond what I had already found out for myself. The robbery was declared to have been (as I had supposed) a planned thing. Though we had none of us noticed them at the rectory, it was ascertained that the thieves had been at Dimchurch on the day when the unlucky plates were first delivered at Browndown. Having taken their time to examine the house, and to make themselves acquainted with the domestic habits of the persons in it, the rogues had paid their second visit to the village—no doubt to commit the robbery—on the occasion when we had discovered them. Foiled by the unexpected return of the gold and silver to London, they had waited again, had followed the plates back to Browndown, and had effected their object—thanks to the lonely situation of the house, and to the murderous blow which had stretched Oscar insensible on the floor.

More than one witness had met them on

the road back to Brighton, with the packing-case in the chaise. But when they returned to the livery-stables from which they had hired the vehicle, the case was not to be seen. Accomplices in Brighton had, in all probability, assisted them in getting rid of it, and in shifting the plates into ordinary articles of luggage, which would attract no special attention at the railway station. This was the explanation given by the police. Right or wrong, the one fact remains that the villains were not caught, and that the assault and robbery at Oscar's house may be added to the long list of crimes cleverly enough committed to defy the vengeance of the law.

For ourselves, we all agreed—led by Lucilla—to indulge in no useless lamentations, and to be grateful that Oscar had escaped without serious injury. The mischief was done; and there was an end of it.

In this philosophical spirit, we looked at the affair while our invalid was recovering. We all plumed ourselves on our excellent good sense—and (ah, poor stupid human wretches!) we were all fatally wrong. So far from the mischief being at an end, the mis-

chief had only begun. The true results of the robbery at Browndown were yet to show themselves, and were yet to be felt in the strangest and the saddest way by every member of the little circle assembled at Dimchurch.

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH.

FIRST RESULT OF THE ROBBERY.

BETWEEN five and six weeks passed. Oscar was out of his bed-room, and was well of his wound.

During this lapse of time, Lucilla steadily pursued that process of her own of curing him, which was to end in marrying him. Never had I seen such nursing before —never do I expect to see such nursing again. From morning to night, she interested him, and kept him in good spirits. The charming creature actually made her blindness a means of lightening the weary hours of the man she loved.

Sometimes, she would sit before Oscar's looking-glass, and imitate all the innumerable tricks, artifices, and vanities of a coquette

arraying herself for conquest—with such wonderful truth and humour of mimicry, that you would have sworn she possessed the use of her eyes. Sometimes, she would show him her extraordinary power of calculating by the sound of a person's voice, the exact position which that person occupied towards her in a room. Selecting me as the victim, she would first provide herself with one of the nosegays always placed by her own hands at Oscar's bedside; and would then tell me to take up my position noiselessly in any part of the room that I pleased, and to say "Lucilla." The instant the words were out of my mouth, the nosegay flew from her hand and hit me on the face. She never once missed her aim, on any one of the occasions when this experiment was tried—and she never once flagged in her childish enjoyment of the exhibition of her own skill.

Nobody was allowed to pour out Oscar's medicine but herself. She knew when the spoon into which it was to be measured was full, by the sound which the liquid made in falling into it. When he was able to sit up in his bed, and when she was standing at the pillow-

side, she could tell him how near his head was to hers, by the change which he produced, when he bent forward or when he drew back, in the action of the air on her face. In the same way, she knew as well as he knew, when the sun was out and when it was behind a cloud—judging by the differing effect of the air, at such times, on her forehead and on her cheeks.

All the litter of little objects accumulating in a sick-room, she kept in perfect order on a system of her own. She delighted in putting the room tidy late in the evening, when we helpless people who could see were beginning to think of lighting the candles. The time when we could just discern her, flitting to and fro in the dusk, in her bright summer dress—now visible as she passed the window, now lost in the shadows at the end of the room—was the time when she began to clear the tables of the things that had been wanted in the day, and to replace them by the things which would be wanted at night. We were only allowed to light the candles when they showed us the room magically put in order during the darkness as if the fairies had done

it. She laughed scornfully at our surprise, and said she sincerely pitied the poor useless people who could only see!

The same pleasure which she had in arranging the room in the dark she also felt in wandering all over the house in the dark, and in making herself thoroughly acquainted with every inch of it from top to bottom. As soon as Oscar was well enough to go down-stairs, she insisted on leading him.

"You have been so long up in your bedroom," she said, "that you must have forgotten the rest of the house. Take my arm—and come along. Now we are out in the passage. Mind! there is a step down, just at this place. And now a step up again. Here is a sharp corner to turn at the top of the staircase. And there is a rod out of the stair-carpet, and an awkward fold in it that might throw you down." So she took him into his own drawing room, as if it was he that was blind, and she who had the use of her eyes. Who could resist such a nurse as this? Is it wonderful that I heard a sound suspiciously like the sound of a kiss, on that first day of convalescence, when I happened for a moment to be out of the

room? I strongly suspected her of leading the way in that also. She was so wonderfully composed when I came back—and he was so wonderfully flurried.

In a week from his convalescence, Lucilla completed the cure of the patient. In other words, she received from Oscar an offer of marriage. I have not the slightest doubt, in my own mind, that he required assistance in bringing this delicate matter to a climax—and that Lucilla helped him.

I may be right or I may be wrong about this. But I can at least certify that Lucilla was in such mad high spirits when she told me the news out in the garden, on a lovely autumn morning, that she actually danced for joy—and, more improper still, she made me, at my discreet time of life, dance too. She took me round the waist, and we waltzed on the grass—Mrs. Finch standing by in the condemned blue merino jacket (with the baby in one hand and the novel in the other), and warning us both that if we lost half an hour out of our day, in whirling each other round the lawn, we should never succeed in picking it up again in that house. We went on whirling, for all that,

until we were both out of breath. Nothing short of downright exhaustion could tame Lucilla. As for me, I am, I sincerely believe, the rashest person of my age now in existence. (What is my age? Ah, I am always discreet about that; it is the one exception.) Set down my rashness to my French nationality, my easy conscience, and my excellent stomach —and let us go on with our story.

There was a private interview at Browndown, later on that day, between Oscar and Reverend Finch.

Of what passed on that occasion, I was not informed. The rector came back among us with his head high in the air, strutting magnificently on his wizen little legs. He embraced his daughter in pathetic silence, and gave me his hand with a serene smile of condescension worthy of the greatest humbug (say Louis the Fourteenth) that ever sat on a throne. When he got the better of his paternal emotion, and began to speak, his voice was so big that I really thought it must have burst him. The vapour of words in which he enveloped himself (condensed on paper) amounted to these two statements. First, that he hailed in Oscar

(not having, I suppose, children enough already of his own) the advent of another son. Secondly, that he saw the finger of Providence in everything that had happened. Alas, for me! My irreverent French nature saw nothing but the finger of Finch—in Oscar's pocket.

The wedding-day was not then actually fixed. It was only generally arranged that the marriage should take place in about six weeks.

This interval was intended to serve a double purpose. It was to give the lawyers time to prepare the marriage settlements, and to give Oscar time to completely recover his health. Some anxiety was felt by all of us on this latter subject. His wound was well, and his mind was itself again. But still there was something wrong with him, for all that.

Those curious contradictions in his character which I have already mentioned, showed themselves more strangely than ever. The man who had found the courage (when his blood was up) to measure himself alone and unarmed against two robbers, was now unable to enter the room in which the struggle had taken place, without trembling from head to

foot. He, who had laughed at me when I begged him not to sleep in the house by himself, now had *two* men (a gardener and an indoor servant) domiciled at Browndown to protect him—and felt no sense of security even in that. He was constantly dreaming that the ruffian with the "life-preserver" was attacking him again, or that he was lying bleeding on the floor and coaxing Jicks to venture within reach of his hand. If any of us hinted at his occupying himself once more with his favourite art, he stopped his ears, and entreated us not to renew his horrible associations with the past. He would not even look at his box of chasing tools. The doctor—summoned to say what was the matter with him—told us that his nervous system had been shaken, and frankly acknowledged that there was nothing to be done but to wait until time set it right again.

I am afraid I must confess that I myself took no very indulgent view of the patient's case.

It was his duty to exert himself—as I thought. He appeared to me to be too indolent to make a proper effort to better his own

condition. Lucilla and I had more than one animated discussion about him. On a certain evening when we were at the piano gossiping, and playing in the intervals, she was downright angry with me for not sympathising with her darling as unreservedly as she did. "I have noticed one thing, Madame Pratolungo," she said to me, with a flushed face and a heightened tone. "You have never done Oscar justice from the first."

(Mark those trifling words. The time is coming when you will hear of them again.)

The preparations for the contemplated marriage went on. The lawyers produced their sketch of the settlement; and Oscar wrote (to an address in New York, given to him by Nugent) to tell his brother of the approaching change in his life, and of the circumstances which had brought it about.

The marriage settlement was not shown to me; but, from certain signs and tokens, I guessed that Oscar's perfect disinterestedness on the question of money had been turned to profitable account by Oscar's future father-in-law. Reverend Finch was reported to have shed tears when he first read the document.

And Lucilla came out of the study, after an interview with her father, more thoroughly and vehemently indignant than I had ever seen her yet. "Don't ask what is the matter!" she said to me between her teeth. "I am ashamed to tell you." When Oscar came in, a little later, she fell on her knees—literally on her knees—before him. Some overmastering agitation was in possession of her whole being, which made her, for the moment, reckless of what she said or did. "I worship you!" she burst out hysterically, kissing his hand. "You are the noblest of living men. I can never, never be worthy of you!" The interpretation of these high flown sayings and doings was, to my mind, briefly this: Oscar's money in the rector's pocket; and the rector's daughter used as the means.

The interval expired; the weeks succeeded each other. All had been long since ready for the marriage—and still the marriage did not take place.

Far from becoming himself again, with time to help him—as the doctor had foretold—Oscar steadily grew worse. All the nervous symptoms (to use the medical phrase)

which I have already described, strengthened instead of loosening their hold on him. He grew thinner and thinner, and paler and paler. Early in the month of November, we sent for the doctor again. The question to be put to him this time, was the question (suggested by Lucilla) of trying as a last remedy change of air.

Something—I forget what—delayed the arrival of our medical man. Oscar had given up all idea of seeing him that day, and had come to us at the rectory—when the doctor drove into Dimchurch. He was stopped before he went on to Browndown; and he and his patient saw each other alone in Lucilla's sitting-room.

They were a long time together. Lucilla, waiting with me in my bed-chamber, grew impatient. She begged me to knock at the sitting-room door, and inquire when she might be permitted to assist at the consultation.

I found doctor and patient standing together at the window, talking quietly. Evidently, nothing had passed to excite either of them in the smallest degree. Oscar looked

a little pale and weary—but he, like his medical adviser, was perfectly composed.

"There is a young lady in the next room," I said, "who is getting anxious to hear what your consultation has ended in."

The doctor looked at Oscar, and smiled.

"There is really nothing to tell Miss Finch," he said. "Mr. Dubourg and I have gone all over the case again—and nothing new has come of it. His nervous system has not recovered its balance so soon as I expected. I am sorry—but I am not in the least alarmed. At his age, things are sure to come right in the end. He must be patient, and the young lady must be patient. I can say no more."

"Do you see any objection to his trying change of air?" I inquired.

"None, whatever! Let him go where he likes, and amuse himself as he likes. You are all of you a little disposed to take Mr. Dubourg's case too seriously. Except the nervous derangement (unpleasant enough in itself, I grant), there is really nothing the matter with him. He has not a trace of organic disease anywhere. The pulse," con-

tinued the doctor, laying his fingers lightly on Oscar's wrist, "is perfectly satisfactory. I never felt a quieter pulse in my life."

As the words passed his lips, a frightful contortion fastened itself on Oscar's face.

His eyes turned up hideously.

From head to foot his whole body was wrenched round, as if giant hands had twisted it, towards the right.

Before I could speak, he was in convulsions on the floor at his doctor's feet.

"Good God, what is this!" I cried out.

The doctor loosened his cravat, and moved away the furniture that was near him. That done, he waited—looking at the writhing figure on the floor.

"Can you do nothing more?" I asked.

He shook his head gravely. "Nothing more."

"What is it?"

"An epileptic fit."

CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH.

THE DOCTOR'S OPINION.

BEFORE another word had been exchanged between us, Lucilla entered the room. We looked at each other. If we could have spoken at that moment, I believe we should both have said, "Thank God, she is blind!"

"Have you all forgotten me?" she asked. "Oscar! where are you? What does the doctor say?"

She advanced into the room. In a moment more, she would have stumbled against the prostrate man still writhing on the floor. I laid my hand on her arm, and stopped her.

She suddenly caught my hand in hers. "Why did you tremble," she asked, "when you took me by the arm? Why are you

trembling now?" Her delicate sense of touch was not to be deceived. I vainly denied that anything had happened: my hand had betrayed me. "There is something wrong!" she exclaimed. "Oscar has not answered me."

The doctor came to my assistance.

"There is nothing to be alarmed about," he said. "Mr. Dubourg is not very well to-day."

She turned on the doctor, with a sudden burst of anger.

"You are deceiving me!" she cried. "Something serious has happened to him. The truth! tell me the truth! Oh! it's shameful, it's heartless of both of you to deceive a wretched blind creature like me!"

The doctor still hesitated. I told her the truth.

"Where is he?" she asked, seizing me by the two shoulders, and shaking me in the violence of her agitation.

I entreated her to wait a little; I tried to place her in a chair. She pushed me contemptuously away, and went down on the floor on her hands and knees. "I shall find

him," she muttered; "I shall find him in spite of you!" She began to crawl over the floor, feeling the empty space before her with her hand. It was horrible. I followed her, and raised her again, by main force.

"Don't struggle with her," said the doctor. "Let her come here. He is quiet now."

I looked at Oscar. The worst of it was over. He was exhausted—he was quite still now. The doctor's voice guided her to the place. She sat down by Oscar on the floor, and laid his head on her lap. The moment she touched him, the same effect was produced on her which would be produced (if our eyes were bandaged) on you or me when the bandage was taken off. An instant sense of relief diffused itself through her whole being. She became her gentler and sweeter self again. "I am sorry I lost my temper," she said with the simplicity of a child. "But you don't know how hard it is to be deceived when you are blind." She stooped as she said those words, and passed her handkerchief lightly over his forehead. "Doctor," she asked, "will this happen again?"

"I hope not."

"Are you sure not?"

"I can't say that."

"What has brought it on?"

"I am afraid the blow he received on the head has brought it on."

She asked no more questions: her eager face passed suddenly into a state of repose. Something seemed to have come into her mind—after the doctor's answer to her last question—which absorbed her in herself. When Oscar recovered his consciousness, she left it to me to answer the first natural questions which he put. When he personally addressed her, she spoke to him kindly, but briefly. Something in her, at that moment, seemed to keep her apart, even from *him*. When the doctor proposed taking him back to Browndown, she did not insist, as I had anticipated, on going with them. She took leave of him tenderly—but still she let him go. While he yet lingered near the door, looking back at her, she moved away slowly to the further end of the room; self-withdrawn into her own dark world—shut up in her thoughts from him and from us.

The doctor tried to rouse her.

"You must not think too seriously of this," he said, following her to the window at which she stood, and dropping his voice so that Oscar could not hear him. "He has himself told you that he feels lighter and better than he felt before the fit. It has relieved instead of injuring him. There is no danger. I assure you, on my honour, there is nothing to fear."

"Can you assure me, on your honour, of one other thing," she asked, lowering her voice on her side. "Can you honestly tell me that this is not the first of other fits that are to come?"

The doctor parried the question.

"We will have another medical opinion," he answered, "before we decide. The next time I go to see him, a physician from Brighton shall go with me."

Oscar, who had thus far waited, wondering at the change in her, now opened the door. The doctor returned to him. They left us.

She sat down on the window-seat, with her elbows on her knees and her hands grasping her forehead. A long moaning cry burst from her. She said to herself bitterly the one word—"Farewell!"

I approached her; feeling the necessity of reminding her that I was in the room.

"Farewell to what?" I asked, taking my place by her side.

"To his happiness and to mine," she answered, without lifting her head from her hands. "The dark days are coming for Oscar and for me."

"Why should you think that? You heard what the doctor said."

"The doctor doesn't know what I know."

"What you know?"

She paused before she answered me. "Do you believe in fate?" she said, suddenly breaking the silence.

"I believe in nothing which encourages people to despair of themselves," I replied.

She went on without heeding me.

"What caused the fit which seized him in this room? The blow that struck him on the head. How did he receive the blow? In trying to defend what was his and what was mine. What had he been doing on the day when the thieves entered the house? He had been working on the casket which was meant for me. Do you see those events linked together

in one chain? I believe the fit will be followed by some next event springing out of it. Something else is coming to darken his life and to darken mine. There is no wedding-day near for *us*. The obstacles are rising in front of him and in front of me. The next misfortune is very near us. You will see! you will see!" She shivered as she said those words; and, shrinking away from me, huddled herself up in a corner of the window-seat.

It was useless to dispute with her; and worse than useless to sit there, and encourage her to say more. I got up on my feet.

"There is one thing I believe in," I said cheerfully. "I believe in the breeze on the hills. Come for a walk!"

She shrank closer into her corner and shook her head.

"Let me be!" she broke out impatiently. "Leave me by myself!" She rose, repenting the words the moment they were uttered—she put her arm round my neck, and kissed me. "I didn't mean to speak so harshly," said the gentle affectionate creature. "Sister! my heart is heavy. My life to come never looked so dark to my blind eyes

as it looks now." A tear dropped from those poor sightless eyes on my cheek. She turned her head aside abruptly. "Forgive me," she murmured, "and let me go." Before I could answer, she hurried away to hide herself in her room. The sweet girl! How you would have pitied her—how you would have loved her!

I went out alone for my walk. She had not infected me with her superstitious foreboding of ill things to come. But there was one sad word that she had said, in which I could not but agree. After what I had witnessed in that room, the wedding-day did indeed look further off than ever.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH.

FAMILY TROUBLES.

IN four or five days more, Lucilla's melancholy doubts about Oscar were confirmed. He was attacked by a second fit.

The promised consultation with the physician from Brighton took place. Our new doctor did not encourage us to hope. The second fit following so close on the first was, in his opinion, a bad sign. He gave general directions for the treatment of Oscar; and left him to decide for himself whether he would or would not try change of scene. No change, the physician appeared to think, would exert any immediate influence on the recurrence of the epileptic attacks. The patient's general health might be benefited, and

that was all. As for the question of the marriage, he declared without hesitation that we must for the present dismiss all consideration of it from our minds.

Lucilla received the account of what passed at the visit of the doctors with a stubborn resignation which it distressed me to see. "Remember what I told you when the first attack seized him," she said. "Our summer-time is ended; our winter is come."

Her manner, while she spoke, was the manner of a person who is waiting without hope—who feels deliberately that calamity is near. She only roused herself when Oscar came in. He was, naturally enough, in miserable spirits, under the sudden alteration in all his prospects. Lucilla did her best to cheer him, and succeeded. On my side, I tried vainly to persuade him to leave Browndown and amuse himself in some gayer place. He shrank from new faces and new scenes. Between these two unelastic young people, I felt even my native good spirits beginning to sink. If we had been all three down in the bottom of a dry well in a wilderness, we could hardly have surveyed a more dismal prospect

than the prospect we were contemplating now. By good luck, Oscar, like Lucilla, was passionately fond of music. We turned to the piano as our best resource in those days of our adversity. Lucilla and I took it in turns to play, and Oscar listened. I have to report that we got through a great deal of music. I have also to acknowledge that we were very dull.

As for Reverend Finch, he talked his way through his share of the troubles that were trying us now, at the full compass of his voice.

If you had heard the little priest in those days, you would have supposed that nobody could feel our domestic misfortunes as *he* felt them, and grieve over them as *he* grieved. He was a sight to see, on the day of the medical consultation; strutting up and down his wife's sitting-room, and haranguing his audience—composed of his wife and myself. Mrs. Finch sat in one corner, with the baby and the novel, and the petticoat and the shawl. I occupied the other corner; summoned to "consult with the rector." In plain

words, summoned to hear Mr. Finch declare that he was the person principally overshadowed by the cloud which hung over the household.

"I despair, Madame Pratolungo—I assure you, I despair—of conveying any idea of how *I* feel under this most melancholy state of things. You have been very good; you have shown the sympathy of a true friend. But you cannot possibly understand how this blow has fallen on Me. I am crushed. Madame Pratolungo!" (he appealed to me, in my corner); "Mrs. Finch!" (he appealed to his wife, in *her* corner)—"I am crushed. There is no other word to express it but the word I have used. Crushed." He stopped in the middle of the room. He looked expectantly at me—he looked expectantly at his wife. His face and manner said plainly, "If both these women faint, I shall consider it a natural and becoming proceeding on their parts, after what I have just told them." I waited for the lead of the lady of the house. Mrs. Finch did *not* roll prostrate, with the baby and the novel, on the floor. Thus encouraged, I presumed to keep my seat. The

rector still waited for us. I looked as miserable as I could. Mrs. Finch cast her eyes up reverentially at her husband, as if she thought him the noblest of created beings, and silently put her handkerchief to her eyes. Mr. Finch was satisfied; Mr. Finch went on. "My health has suffered—I assure you, Madame Pratolungo, My health has suffered. Since this sad occurrence, my stomach has given way. My balance is lost—my usual regularity is gone. I am subject — entirely through this miserable business—to fits of morbid appetite. I want things at wrong times—breakfast in the middle of the night; dinner at four in the morning. I want something now!" Mr. Finch stopped horror-struck at his condition; pondering with his eyebrows fiercely knit, and his hand pressed convulsively on the lower buttons of his rusty black waistcoat. Mrs. Finch's watery blue eyes looked across the room at me, in a moist melancholy of conjugal distress. The rector, suddenly enlightened after his consultation with his stomach, strutted to the door, flung it wide open, and called down the kitchen stairs with a voice of thunder, "Poach me an

egg!" He came back into the room—held another consultation, keeping his eyes severely fixed on me—strutted back in a furious hurry to the door—and bellowed a counter-order down the kitchen-stairs, "No egg! Do me a red herring!" He came back for the second time, with his eyes closed and his hand laid distractedly on his head. He appealed alternately to Mrs. Finch and to me. "See for yourselves—Mrs. Finch! Madame Pratolungo! see for yourselves what a state I am in. It's simply pitiable. I hesitate about the most trifling things. First, I think I want a poached egg—then, I think I want a red herring—now I don't know what I want. Upon my word of honour as a clergyman and a gentleman, I don't know what I want! Morbid appetite all day; morbid wakefulness all night—what a condition! I can't rest. I disturb my wife at night. Mrs. Finch! I disturb you at night. How many times—since this misfortune fell upon us—do I turn in bed before I fall off to sleep? Eight times? Are you certain of it? Don't exaggerate! Are you certain you counted! Very well: good creature! I never remember—I

assure you, Madame Pratolungo, I never remember—such a complete upset as this before. The nearest approach to it was some years since, at my wife's last confinement but four. Mrs. Finch! was it at your last confinement but four? or your last but five? Your last but four? Are you sure? Are you certain you are not misleading our friend here? Very well: good creature! Pecuniary difficulties, Madame Pratolungo, were at the bottom of it on that last occasion. I got over the pecuniary difficulties. How am I to get over this? My plans for Oscar and Lucilla were completely arranged. My relations with my wedded children were pleasantly laid out. I saw my own future; I saw the future of my family. What do I see now? All, so to speak, annihilated at a blow. Inscrutable Providence!" He paused, and lifted his eyes and hands devotionally to the ceiling. The cook appeared with the red herring. "Inscrutable Providence"—proceeded Mr. Finch, a tone lower. "Eat it, dear," said Mrs. Finch, "while it's hot." The rector paused again. His unresting tongue urged him to proceed; his undisciplined stomach clamoured for the herring.

The cook uncovered the dish. Mr. Finch's nose instantly sided with Mr. Finch's stomach. He stopped at "Inscrutable Providence"—and peppered his herring.

Having reported how the rector spoke, in the presence of the disaster which had fallen on the family, I have only to complete the picture by stating next what he did. He borrowed two hundred pounds of Oscar; and left off commanding red herrings in the day and disturbing Mrs. Finch at night, immediately afterwards.

The dull autumn days ended, and the long nights of winter began.

No change for the better appeared in our prospects. The doctors did their best for Oscar—without avail. The horrible fits came back, again and again. Day after day, our dull lives went monotonously on. I almost began now to believe, with Lucilla, that a crisis of some sort must be at hand. "This cannot last," I used to say to myself—generally when I was very hungry. "Something will happen before the year comes to its end."

The month of December began; and some-

thing happened at last. The family troubles at the rectory were matched by family troubles of my own. A letter arrived for me from one of my younger sisters at Paris. It contained alarming news of a person very dear to me—already mentioned in the first of these pages as my good Papa.

Was the venerable author of my being dangerously ill of a mortal disease? Alas! he was not exactly that—but the next worst thing to it. He was dangerously in love with a disreputable young woman. At what age? At the age of seventy-five! What can we say of my surviving parent? We can only say, This is a vigorous nature; Papa has an evergreen heart.

I am grieved to trouble you with my family concerns. But they mix themselves up intimately, as you will see in due time, with the concerns of Oscar and Lucilla. It is my unhappy destiny that I cannot possibly take you through the present narrative, without sooner or later disclosing the one weakness (amiable weakness) of the gayest and brightest and best-preserved man of his time.

Ah, I am now treading on egg-shells, I

know! The English spectre called Propriety springs up rampant on my writing-table, and whispers furiously in my ear, "Madame Pratolungo, raise a blush on the Cheek of Innocence, and it is all over from that moment with you and your story." Oh, inflammable Cheek of Innocence, be good-natured for once, and I will rack my brains to try if I can put it to you without offence! May I picture good Papa as an elder in the Temple of Venus, burning incense inexhaustibly on the altar of love? No: Temple of Venus is Pagan; altar of love is not proper—take them out. Let me only say of my evergreen parent that his life from youth to age had been one unintermitting recognition of the charms of the sex—and that my sisters and I (being of the sex) could not find it in our hearts to abandon him on that account. So handsome, so affectionate, so sweet-tempered; with only one fault—and that a compliment to the women, who naturally adored him in return! We accepted our destiny. For years past (since the death of Mamma), we accustomed ourselves to live in perpetual dread of his marrying some one of the hundreds of unscrupulous hussies who took possession of

him: and, worse if possible than that, of his fighting duels about them with men young enough to be his grandsons. Papa was so susceptible! Papa was so brave! Over and over again, I had been summoned to interfere, as the daughter who had the strongest influence over him. I had succeeded in effecting his rescue, now by one means, and now by another; ending always, however, in the same sad way, by the sacrifice of money for damages—on which damages, when the woman is shameless enough to claim them, my verdict is, "Serve her right!"

On the present occasion, it was the old story over again. My sisters had done their best to stop it, and had failed. I had no choice but to appear on the scene—to begin, perhaps, by boxing her ears: to end, certainly, by filling her pockets.

My absence at this time was something more than an annoyance—it was a downright grief to my blind Lucilla. On the morning of my departure, she clung to me as if she was determined not to let me go.

"What shall I do without you?" she said. "It is hard, in these dreary days, to lose the

comfort of hearing your voice. I shall feel all my security gone, when I feel you no longer near me. How many days shall you be away ?"

"A day to get to Paris," I answered ; "and a day to get back—two. Five days (if I can do it in the time) to thunderstrike the hussy, and to rescue Papa—seven. Let us say, if possible, a week."

"You must be back, no matter what happens, before the new year."

"Why ?"

"I have my yearly visit to pay to my aunt. It has been twice put off. I must absolutely go to London on the last day of the old year, and stay there my allotted three months in Miss Batchford's house. I had hoped to be Oscar's wife before the time came round again——" she waited a moment to steady her voice. "That is all over now. We must be parted. If I can't leave you here to console him and to take care of him, come what may of it—I shall stay at Dimchurch."

Her staying at Dimchurch, while she was still unmarried, meant (under the terms of her uncle's will) sacrificing her fortune. If Reve-

rend Finch had heard her, he would not even have been able to say "Inscrutable Providence"—he would have lost his senses on the spot.

"Don't be afraid," I said; "I shall be back, Lucilla, before you go. Besides, Oscar may get better. He may be able to follow you to London, and visit you at your aunt's."

She shook her head, with such a sad, sad doubt of it, that the tears came into my eyes. I gave her a last kiss—and hurried away.

My route was to Newhaven, and then across the Channel to Dieppe. I don't think I really knew how fond I had grown of Lucilla, until I lost sight of the rectory at the turn in the road to Brighton. My natural firmness deserted me; I felt torturing presentiments that some great misfortune would happen in my absence; I astonished myself—I, the widow of the Spartan Pratolungo!—by having a good cry, like any other woman. Sooner or later, we susceptible people pay with the heartache for the privilege of loving. No matter: heartache or not, one must have something to love in this world as long as one lives in it. I have lived in it—never mind

how many years—and I have got Lucilla. Before Lucilla I had the Doctor. Before the Doctor—ah, my friends, we won't look back beyond the Doctor!

CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH.

SECOND RESULT OF THE ROBBERY.

THE history of my proceedings in Paris can be dismissed in very few words. It is only necessary to dwell in detail on one among the many particulars which connect themselves in my memory with the rescue of good Papa.

The affair, this time, assumed the gravest possible aspect. The venerable victim had gone the length of renewing his youth, in respect of his teeth, his hair, his complexion, and his figure (this last involving the purchase of a pair of stays). I declare I hardly knew him again, he was so outrageously and unnaturally young. The utmost stretch of my influence was exerted over him in vain. He embraced me with the most touching fervour;

he expressed the noblest sentiments—but in the matter of his contemplated marriage, he was immovable. Life was only tolerable to him on one condition. The beloved object, or death—such was the programme of this volcanic old man.

To make the prospect more hopeless still, the beloved object proved, on this occasion, to be a bold enough woman to play her trump card at starting.

I give the jade her due. She assumed a perfectly unassailable attitude: we had her full permission to break off the match—if we could. "I refer you to your father. Pray understand that *I* don't wish to marry him, if his daughters object to it. He has only to say, 'Release me.' From that moment he is free." There was no contending against such a system of defence as this. We knew as well as she did that our fascinated parent would *not* say the word. Our one chance was to spend money in investigating the antecedent indiscretions of this lady's life, and to produce against her proof so indisputable that not even an old man's infatuation could say, This is a lie.

We disbursed; we investigated; we secured our proof. It took a fortnight. At the end of that time, we had the necessary materials in hand for opening the eyes of good Papa.

In the course of the inquiry I was brought into contact with many strange people—among others, with a man who startled me, at our first interview, by presenting a personal deformity, which, with all my experience of the world, I now saw oddly enough for the first time.

The man's face, instead of exhibiting any of the usual shades of complexion, was hideously distinguished by a superhuman—I had almost said, a devilish—colouring of livid blackish *blue!* He proved to be a most kind, intelligent, and serviceable person. But when we first confronted each other, his horrible colour so startled me, that I could not repress a cry of alarm. He not only passed over my involuntary act of rudeness in the most indulgent manner—he explained to me the cause which had produced his peculiarity of complexion; so as to put me at my ease before

we entered on the delicate private inquiry which had brought us together.

"I beg your pardon," said this unfortunate man, "for not having warned you of my disfigurement, before I entered the room. There are hundreds of people discoloured as I am, in the various parts of the civilised world; and I supposed that you had met, in the course of your experience, with other examples of my case. The blue tinge in my complexion is produced by the effect on the blood of Nitrate of Silver—taken internally. It is the only medicine which relieves sufferers like me from an otherwise incurable malady. We have no alternative but to accept the consequences for the sake of the cure."

He did not mention what his malady had been; and I abstained, it is needless to say, from questioning him further. I got used to his disfigurement in the course of my relations with him; and I should no doubt have forgotten my blue man in attending to more absorbing matters of interest, if the effects of Nitrate of Silver as a medicine had not been once more unexpectedly forced on my attention, in another quarter, and under circum-

stances which surprised me in no ordinary degree.

Having saved Papa on the brink of—let us say, his twentieth precipice, it was next necessary to stay a few days longer and reconcile him to the hardship of being rescued in spite of himself. You would have been greatly shocked, if you had seen how he suffered. He gnashed his expensive teeth; he tore his beautifully manufactured hair. In the fervour of his emotions, I have no doubt he would have burst his new stays—if I had not taken them away, and sold them half-price, and made (to that small extent) a profit out of our calamity to set against the loss. Do what one may in the detestable system of modern society, the pivot on which it all turns is Money. Money, when you are saving Freedom! Money when you are saving Papa! Is there no remedy for this? A word in your ear. Wait till the next revolution!

During the time of my absence, I had of course corresponded with Lucilla.

Her letters to me—very sad and very short—reported a melancholy state of things at Dimchurch. While I had been away, the

dreadful epileptic seizures had attacked Oscar with increasing frequency and increasing severity. The moment I could see my way to getting back to England, I wrote to Lucilla to cheer her with the intimation of my return. Two days only before my departure from Paris, I received another letter from her. I was weak enough to be almost afraid to open it. Her writing to me again, when she knew that we should be re-united at such an early date, suggested that she must have some very startling news to communicate. My mind misgave me that it would prove to be news of the worst sort.

I summoned courage to open the envelope. Ah, what fools we are! For once that our presentiments come right, they prove a hundred times to be wrong. Instead of distressing me, the letter delighted me. Our gloomy prospect was brightening at last.

Thus—feeling her way over the paper, in her large childish characters—Lucilla wrote:

"DEAREST FRIEND AND SISTER,—I cannot wait until we meet, to tell you my good news. The Brighton doctor has been dismissed; and a doctor from London has been tried instead. My dear! for intellect there is

nothing like London. The new man sees, thinks, and makes up his mind on the spot. He has a way of his own of treating Oscar's case; and he answers for curing him of the horrible fits. There is news for you! Come back, and let us jump for joy together. How wrong I was to doubt the future! Never, never, never will I doubt it again. This is the longest letter I have ever written. "Your affectionate,

"LUCILLA."

To this, a postscript was added, in Oscar's handwriting, as follows:—

"Lucilla has told you that there is some hope for me at last. What I write in this place is written without her knowledge—for your private ear only. Take the first opportunity you can find of coming to see me at Browndown, without allowing Lucilla to hear of it. I have a great favour to ask of you. My happiness depends on your granting it. You shall know what it is, when we meet. "OSCAR."

This postscript puzzled me.

It was not in harmony with the implicit confidence which I had observed Oscar to place habitually in Lucilla. It jarred on my experience of his character, which presented him to me as the reverse of a reserved secretive man. His concealment of his identity, when he first came among us, had been a forced concealment—due entirely to his horror of being identified with the hero of the

trial. In all the ordinary relations of life, he was open and unreserved to a fault. That he could have a secret to keep from Lucilla, and to confide to me, was something perfectly unintelligible to my mind. It highly excited my curiosity; it gave me a new reason for longing to get back.

I was able to make all my arrangements, and to bid adieu to my father and my sisters on the evening of the twenty-third. Early on the morning of the twenty-fourth, I left Paris, and reached Dimchurch in time for the final festivities in celebration of Christmas Eve.

The first hour of Christmas Day had struck on the clock in our own pretty sitting-room, before I could prevail upon Lucilla to let me rest, after my journey, in bed. She was now once more the joyous light-hearted creature of our happier time; and she had so much to say to me, that not even her father himself (on this occasion) could have talked her down. The next morning she paid the penalty of exciting herself over-night. When I went into her room, she was suffering from a nervous headache, and was not able to rise at her usual hour. She proposed of her own accord

that I should go alone to Browndown to see Oscar on my return. It is only doing common justice to myself to say that this was a relief to me. If she had had the use of her eyes, my conscience would have been easy enough—but I shrank from deceiving my dear blind girl, even in the slightest things.

So, with Lucilla's knowledge and approval, I went to Oscar alone.

I found him fretful and anxious—ready to flame out into one of his sudden passions, on the smallest provocation. Not the slightest reflection of Lucilla's recovered cheerfulness appeared in Lucilla's lover.

"Has she said anything to you about the new doctor?" were the first words he addressed to me.

"She has told me that she feels the greatest faith in him," I answered. "She firmly believes that he speaks the truth in saying he can cure you."

"Did she show any curiosity to know *how* he is curing me?"

"Not the slightest curiosity that I could see. It is enough for her that you are to be cured. The rest she leaves to the doctor."

My last answer appeared to relieve him. He sighed, and leaned back in his chair. "That's right!" he said to himself. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Is the doctor's treatment of you a secret?" I asked.

"It must be a secret from Lucilla," he said, speaking very earnestly. "If she attempts to find it out, she must be kept—for the present, at least—from all knowledge of it. Nobody has any influence over her but you. I look to you to help me."

"Is this the favour you had to ask me?"

"Yes."

"Am I to know the secret of the medical treatment?"

"Certainly! How can I expect you to help me unless you know what a serious reason there is for keeping Lucilla in the dark."

He laid a strong emphasis on the two words, "serious reason." I began to feel a little uneasy. I had never yet taken the slightest advantage of my poor Lucilla's blindness. And here was her promised husband—of all the people in the world—proposing to me to keep her in the dark!

"Is the new doctor's treatment dangerous?" I inquired.

"Not in the least."

"Is it not so certain as he has led Lucilla to believe?"

"It is quite certain."

"Did the other doctors know of it?"

"Yes."

"Why did they not try it?"

"They were afraid."

"Afraid? What *is* the treatment?"

"Medicine."

"Many medicines? or one?"

"Only one."

"What is the name of it?"

"Nitrate of Silver."

I started to my feet, looked at him, and dropped back into my chair.

My mind reverted, the instant I recovered myself, to the effect produced on me when the blue man in Paris first entered my presence. In informing me of the effect of the medicine, he had (you will remember) concealed from me the malady for which he had taken it. It had been left to Oscar, of all the people in the world, to enlighten me—

and that by a reference to his own case! I was so shocked that I sat speechless.

With his quick sensibilities, there was no need for me to express myself in words. My face revealed to him what was passing in my mind.

"You have seen a person who has taken Nitrate of Silver!" he exclaimed.

"Have *you?*" I asked.

"I know the price I pay for being cured," he answered quietly.

His composure staggered me. "How long have you been taking this horrible drug?" I inquired.

"A little more than a week."

"I see no change in you yet."

"The doctor tells me there will be no visible change for weeks and weeks to come."

Those words roused a momentary hope in me. "There is time to alter your mind," I said. "For heaven's sake reconsider your resolution before it is too late!"

He smiled bitterly. "Weak as I am," he answered, "for once, my mind is made up."

I suppose I took a woman's view of the matter. I lost my temper when I looked at

his beautiful complexion and thought of the future.

"Are you in your right senses?" I burst out. "Do you mean to tell me that you are deliberately bent on making yourself an object of horror to everybody who sees you?"

"The one person whose opinion I care for," he replied, "will never see me."

I understood him at last. That was the consideration which had reconciled him to it!

Lucilla's horror of dark people and dark shades of colour of all kinds was, it is needless to say, recalled to my memory by the turn the conversation was taking now. Had she confessed it to him, as she had confessed it to me? No! I remembered that she had expressly warned me not to admit him into our confidence in this matter. At an early period of their acquaintance, she had asked him which of his parents he resembled. This led him into telling her that his father had been a dark man. Lucilla's delicacy had at once taken the alarm. "He speaks very tenderly of his dead father," she said to me. "It may hurt him if he finds out the antipathy I have to dark people. Let us keep it to

ourselves." As things now were, it was on the tip of my tongue to remind him, that Lucilla would hear of his disfigurement from other people; and then to warn him of the unpleasant result that might follow. On reflection, however, I thought it wiser to wait a little and sound his motives first.

"Before you tell me how I can help you," I said, "I want to know one thing more. Have you decided in this serious matter entirely by yourself? Have you taken no advice?

"I don't want advice," he answered sharply. "My case admits of no choice. Even such a nervous undecided creature as I am, can judge for himself where there is no alternative."

"Did the doctors tell you there was no alternative?" I asked.

"The doctors were afraid to tell me. I had to force it out of them. I said, 'I appeal to your honour to answer a plain question plainly. Is there any certain prospect of my getting the better of the fits?' They only said, 'At your time of life, we may reasonably hope so.' I pressed them closer:—'Can

you fix a date to which I may look forward as the date of my deliverance?' They could neither of them do it. All they could say was, 'Our experience justifies us in believing that you will grow out of it; but it does *not* justify us in saying when.' 'Then, I may be years growing out of it?' They were obliged to own that it might be so. 'Or I may never grow out of it, at all?' They tried to turn the conversation. I wouldn't have it. I said, 'Tell me honestly, is that one of the possibilities, in my case?' The Dimchurch doctor looked at the London doctor. The London man said, 'If you will have it, it *is* one of the possibilities.' Just consider the prospect which his answer placed before me! Day after day, week after week, month after month, always in danger, go where I may, of falling down in a fit—is that a miserable position? or is it not?"

How could I answer him? What could I say?

He went on:—

"Add to that wretched state of things that I am engaged to be married. The hardest disappointment which can fall on a man, falls

on me. The happiness of my life is within my reach—and I am forbidden to enjoy it. It is not only my health that is broken up, my prospects in life are ruined as well. The woman I love is a woman forbidden to me while I suffer as I suffer now. Realise that —and then fancy you see a man sitting at this table here, with pen, ink, and paper before him, who has only to scribble a line or two, and to begin the cure of you from that moment. Deliverance in a few months from the horror of the fits; marriage in a few months to the woman you love. That heavenly prospect in exchange for the hellish existence that you are enduring now. And the one price to pay for it, a discoloured face for the rest of your life—which the one person who is dearest to you will never see! Would you have hesitated? When the doctor took up the pen to write the prescription—tell me, if you had been in my place, would you have said, No?"

I still sat silent. My obstinacy—women are such mules!—declined to give way, even when my conscience told me that he was right.

He sprang to his feet, in the same fever of excitement which I remembered so well, when I had irritated him at Browndown into telling me who he really was.

"Would you have said, No?" he reiterated, stooping over me, flushed and heated, as he had stooped on that first occasion, when he had whispered his name in my ear. "Would you?" he repeated, louder and louder—"would you?"

At the third reiteration of the words, the frightful contortion that I knew so well, seized on his face. The wrench to the right twisted his body. He dropped at my feet. Good God! who could have declared that he was wrong, with such an argument in his favour as I saw at that moment? Who would not have said that any disfigurement would be welcome as a refuge from *this?*

The servant ran in, and helped me to move the furniture to a safe distance from him. "There won't be much more of it, ma'am," said the man, noticing my agitation, and trying to compose me. "In a month or two, the doctor says the medicine will get hold of him." I could say nothing on my side—I

could only reproach myself bitterly for disputing with him and exciting him, and leading perhaps to the hideous seizure which had attacked him in my presence for the second time.

The fit on this occasion was a short one. Perhaps the drug was already beginning to have some influence over him? In twenty minutes, he was able to resume his chair, and to go on talking to me.

"You think I shall horrify you when my face has turned blue," he said with a faint smile. "Don't I horrify you now when you see me in convulsions on the floor?"

I entreated him to dwell on it no more.

"God knows," I said, "you have convinced me—obstinate as I am. Let us try to think of nothing now but of the prospect of your being cured. What do you wish me to do?"

"You have a great influence over Lucilla," he said. "If she expresses any curiosity, in future conversations with you, about the effect of the medicine, check her at once. Keep her as ignorant of it as she is now!"

"Why?"

"Why! If she knows what you know,

how will she feel? Shocked and horrified, as you felt. What will she do? She will come straight here, and try, as you have tried, to persuade me to give it up. Is that true, or not?"

(Impossible to deny that it was true.)

"I am so fond of her," he went on, "that I can refuse her nothing. She would end in making me give it up. The instant her back was turned, I should repent my own weakness, and return to the medicine. Here is a perpetual struggle in prospect, for a man who is already worn out. Is it desirable, after what you have just seen, to expose me to that?"

It would have been useless cruelty to expose him to it. How could I do otherwise than consent to make his sacrifice of himself —his *necessary* sacrifice—as easy as I could? At the same time, I implored him to remember one thing.

"Mind," I said, "we can never hope to keep her in ignorance of the change in you, when the change comes. Sooner or later, some one will let the secret out."

"I only want it to be concealed from her

while the disfigurement of me is in progress," he answered. "When nothing she can say or do will alter it—I will tell her myself. She is so happy in the hope of my recovery! What good *can* be gained by telling her beforehand of the penalty that I pay for my deliverance? My ugly colour will never terrify my poor darling. As for other persons, I shall not force myself on the view of the world. It is my one wish to live out of the world. The few people about me will soon get reconciled to my face. Lucilla will set them the example. She won't trouble herself long about a change in me that she can neither feel nor see."

Ought I to have warned him here of Lucilla's inveterate prejudice, and of the difficulty there might be in reconciling her to the change in him when she heard of it? I dare say I ought. I dare say I was to blame in shrinking from inflicting new anxieties and new distresses on a man who had already suffered so much. The simple truth is—I could not do it. Would you have done it? Ah, if you would, I hope I may never come in contact with you. What a horrid wretch you must be!

The end of it was that I left the house—pledged to keep Lucilla in ignorance of the cost at which Oscar had determined to purchase his cure, until Oscar thought fit to enlighten her himself.

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH.

GOOD PAPA AGAIN!

THE promise I had given did not expose me to the annoyance of being kept long on the watch against accidents. If we could pass safely over the next five days, we might feel pretty sure of the future. On the last day of the old year, Lucilla was bound by the terms of the will to go to London, and live her allotted three months under the roof of her aunt.

In the brief interval that elapsed before her departure, she twice approached the dangerous subject.

On the first occasion, she asked me if I knew what medicine Oscar was taking. I pleaded ignorance, and passed at once to other matters. On the second occasion, she

advanced still further on the way to discovery of the truth. She now inquired if I had heard how the physic worked the cure. Having been already informed that the fits proceeded from a certain disordered condition of the brain, she was anxious to know whether the medical treatment was likely to affect the patient's head. This question (which I was of course unable to answer) she put to both the doctors. Already warned by Oscar, they quieted her by declaring that the process of cure acted by general means, and did *not* attack the head. From that moment, her curiosity was satisfied. Her mind had other objects of interest to dwell on, before she left Dimchurch. She touched on the perilous topic no more.

It was arranged that I was to accompany Lucilla to London.

Oscar was to follow us, when the state of his health permitted him to take the journey. As betrothed husband of Lucilla, he had his right of entry, during her residence in her aunt's house. As for me, I was admitted at Lucilla's intercession. She declined to be separated from me for three months. Miss

Batchford wrote, most politely, to offer me a hospitable welcome during the day. She had no second spare-room at her disposal—so we settled that I was to sleep at a lodging-house in the neighbourhood. In this same house, Oscar was also to be accommodated, when the doctors sanctioned his removal to London. It was now thought likely—if all went well—that the marriage might be celebrated, at the end of the three months, from Miss Batchford's residence in town.

Three days before the date of Lucilla's departure, these plans—so far as I was concerned in them—were all overthrown.

A letter from Paris reached me, with more bad news. My absence had produced the worst possible effect on good Papa. The moment my influence had been removed, he had become perfectly unmanageable. My sisters assured me that the abominable woman from whom I had rescued him, would most certainly end in marrying him after all, unless I reappeared immediately on the scene. What was to be done? Nothing was to be done, but to fly into a rage—to grind my teeth, and throw down all my things, in the solitude

of my own room—and then to go back to Paris.

Lucilla behaved charmingly. When she saw how angry and how distressed I was, she suppressed all exhibition of disappointment on her side, with the truest and kindest consideration for my feelings. "Write to me often," said the charming creature; "and come back to me as soon as you can." Her father took her to London. Two days before they left, I said good-bye at the rectory and at Browndown; and started—once more by the Newhaven and Dieppe route—for Paris.

I was in no humour (as your English saying is) to mince matters, in controlling this new outbreak on the part of my evergreen parent. I insisted on instantly removing him from Paris, and taking him on a continental tour. I was proof against his paternal embraces; I was deaf to his noble sentiments. He declared he should die on the road. When I look back at it now, I am amused at my own cruelty. I said, "En route, Papa!"—and packed him up, and took him to Italy.

He became enamoured, at intervals, now of one fair traveller and now of another, all

through the journey from Paris to Rome. (Wonderful old man!) Arrived at Rome—that hotbed of the enemies of mankind—I saw my way to putting a moral extinguisher on the author of my being. The Eternal City contains three hundred and sixty-five churches, and (say) three million and sixty-five pictures. I insisted on his seeing them all—at the advanced age of seventy-five years! The sedative result followed, exactly as I had anticipated. I stupefied good Papa with churches and pictures—and then I tried him with a marble woman to begin with. He fell asleep before the Venus of the Capitol. When I saw that, I said to myself, Now he will do; Don Juan is reformed at last.

Lucilla's correspondence with me—at first cheerful—gradually assumed a desponding tone.

Six weeks had passed since her departure from Dimchurch; and still Oscar's letters held out no hope of his being able to join her in London. His recovery was advancing, but not so rapidly as his medical adviser had anticipated. It was possible—to look the worst in the face boldly—that he might not get the

doctor's permission to leave Browndown before the time arrived for Lucilla's return to the rectory. In this event, he could only entreat her to be patient, and to remember that though he was gaining ground but slowly, he was still getting on. Under these circumstances, Lucilla was naturally vexed and dejected. She had never (she wrote), from her girlhood upward, spent such a miserable time with her aunt as she was spending now.

On reading this letter, I instantly smelt something wrong.

I corresponded with Oscar almost as frequently as with Lucilla. His last letter to me, flatly contradicted his last letter to his promised wife. In writing to my address, he declared himself to be rapidly advancing towards recovery. Under the new treatment, the fits succeeded each other at longer and longer intervals, and endured a shorter and shorter time. Here then was plainly a depressing report sent to Lucilla, and an encouraging report sent to me.

What did it mean?

Oscar's next letter to me answered the question.

"I told you in my last" (he wrote), "that the discolouration of my skin had begun. The complexion which you were once so good as to admire, has disappeared for ever. I am now of a livid ashen colour—so like death, that I sometimes startle myself when I look in the glass. In about six weeks more, as the doctor calculates, this will deepen to a blackish blue; and then, 'the saturation' (as he calls it) will be complete.

"So far from feeling any useless regrets at having taken the medicine which is producing these ugly effects, I am more grateful to my Nitrate of Silver than words can say. If you ask for the secret of this extraordinary exhibition of philosophy on my part, I can give it in one line. For the last ten days, I have not had a fit. In other words, for the last ten days, I have lived in Paradise. I declare I would have cheerfully lost an arm or a leg to gain the blessed peace of mind, the intoxicating confidence in the future—it is nothing less—that I feel now.

"Still, there is a drawback which prevents me from enjoying perfect tranquillity even yet. When was there ever a pleasure in this world,

without a lurking possibility of pain hidden away in it somewhere?

"I have lately discovered a peculiarity in Lucilla which is new to me, and which has produced a very unpleasant impression on my mind. My proposed avowal to her of the change in my personal appearance, has now become a matter of far more serious difficulty than I had anticipated when the question was discussed between you and me at Browndown.

"Have you ever found out that the strongest antipathy she has, is her purely imaginary antipathy to dark people and to dark shades of colour of all kinds? This strange prejudice is the result, as I suppose, of some morbid growth of her blindness, quite as inexplicable to herself as to other people. Explicable, or not, there it is in her. Read the extract that follows from one of her letters to her father, which her father showed to me—and you will not be surprised to hear that I tremble for myself when the time comes for telling her what I have done.

"Thus she writes to Mr. Finch:—

"'I am sorry to say, I have had a little

quarrel with my aunt. It is all made up now, but it has hardly left us such good friends as we were before. Last week, there was a dinner-party here; and, among the guests, was a Hindoo gentleman (converted to Christianity) to whom my aunt has taken a great fancy. While the maid was dressing me, I unluckily inquired if she had seen the Hindoo —and, hearing that she had, I still more unfortunately asked her to tell me what he was like. She described him as being very tall and lean, with a dark brown complexion and glittering black eyes. My mischievous fancy instantly set to work on this horrid combination of darknesses. Try as I might to resist it, my mind drew a dreadful picture of the Hindoo, as a kind of monster in human form. I would have given worlds to have been excused from going down into the drawing-room. At the last moment I was sent for, and the Hindoo was introduced to me. The instant I felt him approaching, my darkness was peopled with brown demons. He took my hand. I tried hard to control myself— but I really could not help shuddering and starting back when he touched me. To make

matters worse, he sat next to me at dinner. In five minutes, I had long, lean, black-eyed beings all round me; perpetually growing in numbers, and pressing closer and closer on me as they grew. It ended in my being obliged to leave the table. When the guests were all gone, my aunt was furious. I admitted my conduct was unreasonable in the last degree. At the same time, I begged her to make allowances for me. I reminded her that I was blind at a year old, and that I had really no idea of what any person was like, except by drawing pictures of them in my imagination, from description, and from my own knowledge obtained by touch. I appealed to her to remember that, situated as I am, my fancy is peculiarly liable to play me tricks, and that *I* have no sight to see with, and to show me—as other people's eyes show *them*—when they have taken a false view of persons and things. It was all in vain. My aunt would admit of no excuse for me. I was so irritated by her injustice, that I reminded her of an antipathy of her own, quite as ridiculous as mine—an antipathy to cats. She, who can *see* that cats are harmless, shud-

ders and turns pale, for all that, if a cat is in the same room with her. Set my senseless horror of dark people against her senseless horror of cats—and say which of us has the right to be angry with the other?' "

Such was the quotation from Lucilla's letter to her father. At the end of it, Oscar resumed, as follows :—

"I wonder whether you will now understand me, if I own to you that I have made the worst of my case in writing to Lucilla? It is the only excuse I can produce for not joining her in London. Weary as I am of our long separation, I cannot prevail on myself to run the risk of meeting her in the presence of strangers, who would instantly notice my frightful colour, and betray it to her. Think of her shuddering and starting back from *my* hand when it took hers! No! no! I must choose my own opportunity, in this quiet place, of telling her what (I suppose) must be told—with time before me to prepare her mind for the disclosure (if it must come), and with nobody but you near to see the first mortifying effect of the shock which I shall inflict on her.

"I have only to add, before I release you, that I write these lines in the strictest confidence. You have promised not to mention my disfigurement to Lucilla, unless I first give you leave. I now, more than ever, hold you to that promise. The few people about me here, are all pledged to secrecy as you are. If it is really inevitable that she should know the truth—I alone must tell it; in my own way, and at my own time."

"If it must come," "if it is really inevitable"—these phrases in Oscar's letter satisfied me that he was already beginning to comfort himself with an insanely delusive idea—the idea that it might be possible permanently to conceal the ugly personal change in him from Lucilla's knowledge.

If I had been at Dimchurch, I have no doubt I should have begun to feel seriously uneasy at the turn which things appeared to be taking now.

But distance has a very strange effect in altering one's customary way of thinking of affairs at home. Being in Italy instead of in England, I dismissed Lucilla's antipathies and

Oscar's scruples, as both alike unworthy of serious consideration. Sooner or later, time (I considered) would bring these two troublesome young people to their senses. Their marriage would follow, and there would be an end of it! In the meanwhile, I continued to feast good Papa on Holy Families and churches. Ah, poor dear, how he yawned over Caraccis and cupolas! and how fervently he promised never to fall in love again, if I would only take him back to Paris!

We set our faces homeward a day or two after the receipt of Oscar's letter. I left my reformed father, resting his aching old bones in his own easy chair; capable perhaps, even yet, of contracting a Platonic attachment to a lady of his own time of life—but capable (as I firmly believed) of nothing more. "Oh, my child, let me rest!" he said, when I wished him good-bye. "And never show me a church or a picture again as long as I live!"

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST.

MADAME PRATOLUNGO RETURNS TO DIMCHURCH.

I REACHED London in the last week of Lucilla's residence under her aunt's roof, and waited in town until it was time to take her back to Dimchurch.

As soon as it had become obviously too late for Oscar to risk the dreaded meeting with Lucilla, before strangers, his correspondence had, as a matter of course, assumed a brighter tone. She was in high spirits once more, poor thing, when we met—and full of delight at having me near her again. We thoroughly enjoyed our few days in London—and took our fill of music at operas and concerts. I got on excellently well with the aunt until the last day, when something hap-

pened which betrayed me into an avowal of my political convictions.

The old lady's consternation, when she discovered that I looked hopefully forward to a coming extermination of kings and priests, and a general re-distribution of property all over the civilized globe, is unutterable in words. On that occasion, I made one more aristocrat tremble. I also closed Miss Batchford's door on me for the rest of my life. No matter! The day is coming when the Batchford branch of humanity will not possess a door to close. All Europe is drifting nearer and nearer to the Pratolungo programme. Cheer up, my brothers without land, and my sisters without money in the Funds! We will have it out with the infamous rich yet. Long live the Republic!

Early in the month of April, Lucilla and I took leave of the Metropolis, and went back to Dimchurch.

As we drew nearer and nearer to the rectory, as Lucilla began to flush and fidget in eager anticipation of her reunion with Oscar, that uneasiness of mind which I had so readily dismissed while I was in Italy, began to find

its way back to me again. *My* imagination now set to work at drawing pictures—startling pictures of Oscar as a changed being, as a Medusa's head too terrible to be contemplated by mortal eyes. Where would he meet us? At the entrance to the village. No. At the rectory gate? No. In the quieter part of the garden which was at the back of the house? Yes! There he stood, waiting for us—alone!

Lucilla flew into his arms with a cry of delight. I stood behind and looked at them.

Ah, how vividly I remember—at the moment when she embraced him—the first shock of seeing the two faces together! The drug had done its work. I saw her fair cheek laid innocently against the livid blackish blue of *his* discoloured skin. Heavens, how cruelly that first embrace marked the contrast between what he had been when I left him, and what he had changed to when I saw him now! His eyes turned from her face to mine, in silent appeal to me while he held her in his arms. Their look told me the thought in him, as eloquently as if he had put it into words. "You, who love her, say—can we ever be cruel enough to tell her of *this*?"

I approached to take his hand. At the same moment, Lucilla suddenly drew back from him, laid her left hand on his shoulder, and passed her right hand rapidly over his face.

For an instant I felt my heart stand still. Her miraculous sensitiveness of touch had detected the dark colour of my dress, on the day when we first met. Would it serve her, this time, as truly as it had served her then?

She paused, after the first passage of her fingers over his face, with the breathless attention to what she was about, which, in my own case, I remembered so well. A second time, she passed her hand over him—considered again—and turned my way next.

"What does his face tell *you?*" she asked. "It tells *me* that he has something on his mind. What is it?"

We were safe—so far! The hateful medicine, in altering the colour, had not affected the texture, of his skin. As her touch had left it on her departure, so her touch found it again, on her return.

Before I could reply to Lucilla, Oscar answered for himself.

"Nothing is wrong, my darling," he said.

"My nerves are a little out of order to-day; and the joy of seeing you again has overcome me for the moment—that is all."

She shook her head impatiently.

"No," she said, "it's not all." She touched his heart. "Why is it beating so fast?" She took his hand in hers. "Why has it turned so cold? I must know. I *will* know! Come indoors."

At that awkward moment, the most wearisome of living men, suddenly proved himself to be the most welcome of living men. The rector appeared in the garden, to receive his daughter on her return. Enfolded in Reverend Finch's paternal embraces; harangued by Reverend Finch's prodigious voice, Lucilla was effectually silenced—the subject was inevitably changed. Oscar drew me aside out of hearing, while her attention was diverted from him.

"I saw you," he said. "*You* were horrified at the first sight of me. *You* were relieved when you found that her touch told her nothing. Help me to keep her from suspecting it, for two months more—and you will be the best friend that ever man had."

"Two months?" I repeated.

"Yes. If there is no return of the fits in two months, the doctor will consider my recovery complete. Lucilla and I may be married at the end of the time."

"My friend Oscar, are you contemplating a fraud on Lucilla?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come! come! you know what I mean! Is it honourable first to entrap her into marrying you—and then to confess to her the colour of your face?"

He sighed bitterly.

"I shall fill her with horror of me, if I confess it. Look at me! look at me!" he said, lifting his ghastly hands in despair to his blue face.

I was determined not to give way—even to that.

"Be a man!" I said. "Own it boldly. What is she going to marry you for? For your face that she can never see? No! For your heart that is one with her own. Trust to her natural good sense—and, better than that, to the devoted love that you have inspired in her. She will see her stupid preju-

dice in its true light, when she feels it trying to part her from *you*."

"No! no! no! Remember her letter to her father. I shall lose her for ever, if I tell her now!"

I took his arm, and endeavoured to lead him to Lucilla. She was already trying to escape from her father; she was already longing to hear the sound of Oscar's voice again.

He obstinately shrank back. I began to feel angry with him. In another moment, I should have said or done something that I might have repented of afterwards—if a new interruption had not happened before I could open my lips.

Another person appeared in the garden—the man-servant from Browndown; with a letter for his master in his hand.

"This has just come, sir," said the man, "by the afternoon post. It is marked 'Immediate.' I thought I had better bring it to you here."

Oscar took the letter, and looked at the address. "My brother's writing!" he exclaimed. "A letter from Nugent!"

He opened the letter—and burst out with

a cry of joy which brought Lucilla instantly to his side,

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"Nugent is coming back! Nugent will be here in a week! Oh, Lucilla! my brother is coming to stay with me at Browndown!"

He caught her in his arms, and kissed her, in the first rapture of receiving that welcome news. She forced herself away from him without answering a word. She turned her poor blind face round and round, in the search for me.

"Here I am!" I said.

She roughly and angrily put her arm in mine. I saw the jealous misery in her face as she dragged me away with her to the house. Never yet had Oscar's voice, in *her* experience of him, sounded the note of happiness that she heard in it now! Never yet had she felt Oscar's heart on Oscar's lips, as she felt it when he kissed her in the first joy of anticipating Nugent's return!

"Can he hear me?" she whispered, when we had left the lawn, and she felt the gravel under her feet.

"No. What is it?"

"I hate his brother!"

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND.

THE TWIN-BROTHER'S LETTER.

LITTLE thinking what a storm he had raised, poor innocent Oscar—paternally escorted by the rector—followed us into the house, with his open letter in his hand.

Judging by certain signs visible in my reverend friend, I concluded that the announcement of Nugent Dubourg's coming visit to Dimchurch—regarded by the rest of us as heralding the appearance of a twin-brother—was regarded by Mr. Finch as promising the arrival of a twin-fortune. Oscar and Nugent shared the comfortable paternal inheritance. Finch smelt money.

"Compose yourself," I whispered to Lucilla as the two gentlemen followed us into the

sitting-room. "Your jealousy of his brother is a childish jealousy. There is room enough in his heart for his brother as well as for you."

She only repeated obstinately, with a vicious pinch on my arm, "I hate his brother!"

"Come and sit down by me," said Oscar, approaching her on the other side. "I want to run over Nugent's letter. It's so interesting! There is a message in it to you." Too deeply absorbed in his subject to notice the sullen submission with which she listened to him, he placed her on a chair, and began reading. "The first lines," he explained, "relate to Nugent's return to England, and to his delightful idea of coming to stay with me at Browndown. Then he goes on: 'I found all your letters waiting for me on my return to New York. Need I tell you, my dearest brother——'"

Lucilla stopped him at those words by rising abruptly from her seat.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"I don't like this chair!"

Oscar got her another—an easy chair this time—and returned to the letter.

"'Need I tell you, my dearest brother, how deeply you have interested me by the announcement of your contemplated marriage? Your happiness is my happiness. I feel with you; I congratulate you; I long to see my future sister-in-law——'"

Lucilla got up again. Oscar, in astonishment, asked what was wrong now?

"I am not comfortable at this end of the room."

She walked to the other end of the room. Patient Oscar walked after her, with his precious letter in his hand. He offered her a third chair. She petulantly declined to take it, and selected another chair for herself. Oscar returned to the letter:—

"'How melancholy, and yet how interesting it is, to hear that she is blind! My sketches of American scenery happened to be lying about in the room when I read your letter. The first thought that came to me, on hearing of Miss Finch's affliction, was suggested by my sketches. I said to myself, 'Sad! sad! my sister-in-law will never see my Works.' The true artist, Oscar, is always thinking of his Works. I shall bring

back, let me tell you, some very remarkable studies for future pictures. They will not be so numerous, perhaps, as you may expect. I prefer to trust to my intellectual perception of beauty, rather than to mere laborious transcripts from Nature. In certain moods of mine (speaking as an artist) Nature puts me out.'" There Oscar paused, and appealed to me. "What writing!—eh? I always told you, Madame Pratolungo, that Nugent was a genius. You see it now! Don't get up, Lucilla. I am going on. There is a message to you in this part of the letter. So neatly expressed!"

Lucilla persisted in getting up; the announcement of the neatly-expressed message to be read next, produced no effect on her. She walked to the window, and trifled impatiently with the flowers placed in it. Oscar looked in mild astonishment, first at me—then at the rector. Reverend Finch—listening thus far with the complimentary attention due to the correspondence of one young man of fortune with another young man of fortune—interfered in Oscar's interests, to secure him a patient hearing.

"My dear Lucilla, endeavour to control your restlessness. You interfere with our enjoyment of this interesting letter. I could wish to see fewer changes of place, my child, and a more undivided attention to what Oscar is reading to you."

"I am not interested in what he is reading to me." In the nervous irritation which produced this ungracious answer, she overthrew one of the flower-pots. Oscar set it up again for her with undiminished good-temper.

"Not interested!" he exclaimed. "Wait a little. You haven't heard Nugent's message yet. Listen to this! 'Present my best and kindest regards to the future Mrs. Oscar' (dear fellow!); 'and say that she has given me a new interest in hastening my return to England.' There! Isn't that prettily put? Come, Lucilla! own that Nugent is worth listening to when he writes about *you!*"

She turned towards him for the first time. The charm of the tone in which he spoke those words subdued her, in spite of herself.

"I am much obliged to your brother," she answered gently, "and very much ashamed of myself for what I said just now." She

Stole her hand into his, and whispered, "You are so fond of Nugent—I begin to be almost afraid there will be no love left for me."

Oscar was enchanted. "Wait till you see him, and you will be as fond of him as I am," he said. "Nugent is not like me. He fascinates people the moment they come in contact with him. Nobody can resist Nugent."

She still held his hand, with a perplexed and saddened face. The admirable absence of any jealousy on his side—his large and generous confidence in *her* love for *him*—was just the rebuke to her that she could feel; just the rebuke also (in my opinion) that she had deserved.

"Go on, Oscar," said the rector, in his deepest notes of encouragement. "What next, dear boy? what next?"

"Another interesting bit, of quite a new kind," Oscar replied. "There is a little mystery to stir us up on the last page of the letter. Nugent says:—'I have become acquainted (here, in New York) with a very remarkable man, a German who has made a great deal of money in the United States. He proposes visiting England early in the present year;

and he will write and let me know when he has arrived. I shall feel particular pleasure in presenting him to you and your future wife. It is quite possible that you may have special reason to congratulate yourselves on making his acquaintance. For the present no more of my new friend until we meet at Browndown.'——'Special reason to congratulate ourselves on making his acquaintance!'" repeated Oscar, folding up the letter. "Nugent never writes in that way without a reason for it. Who can the German gentleman be?"

Mr. Finch suddenly lifted his head, and looked at Oscar with a certain appearance of alarm.

"Your brother mentions that he has made his fortune in America," said the reverend gentleman. "I hope he is not connected with the money-market. He might infect Mr. Nugent with the spirit of reckless speculation which is, so to speak, the national sin of the United States. Your brother, having no doubt the same generous disposition as yours——"

"A far finer disposition than mine, Mr. Finch," interposed Oscar.

"Possessed, like you, of the gifts of fortune," proceeded the rector, with mounting enthusiasm.

"Once possessed of them," said Oscar. "Far from being overburdened with the gifts of fortune, now!"

"What!!!" cried Mr. Finch, with a start of consternation.

"Nugent has run through his fortune," proceeded Oscar, quite composedly. "I lent him the money to go to America. My brother is a genius, Mr. Finch. When did you ever hear of a genius who could keep within limits? Nugent is not content to live in my humble way. He has the tastes of a prince—money is nothing to him. It doesn't matter. He will make a new fortune out of his pictures; and, in the meantime, you know, I can always lend him something to go on with."

Mr. Finch rose from his seat, with the air of a man whose just anticipations have not been realised—whose innocent confidence has been scandalously betrayed. Here was a prospect! Another person in perpetual want of money, going to settle under the shadow of

the rectory! Another man likely to borrow of Oscar—and that man his brother!

"I fail to take your light view of your brother's extravagance," said the rector, addressing Oscar with his loftiest severity of manner, at the door. "I deplore and reprehend Mr. Nugent's misuse of the bounty bestowed on him by an all-wise Providence. You will do well to consider before you encourage your brother's extravagance by lending him money. What does the great poet of humanity say of lenders? The Bard of Avon tells us, that 'loan oft loses both itself and friend.' Lay that noble line to heart, Oscar! Lucilla, be on your guard against that restlessness which I have already had occasion to reprove. I find I must leave you, Madame Pratolungo. I had forgotten my parish duties. My parish duties are waiting for me. Good day! good day!"

He looked round on us all three, in turn, with a very sour face, and walked out. "Surely," I thought to myself, "this brother of Oscar's is not beginning well! First, the daughter takes offence at him, and now the father follows her example. Even on the

other side of the Atlantic, Mr. Nugent Dubourg exercises a malignant influence, and disturbs the family tranquillity before he has shown his nose in the house!"

Nothing more that is worth recording happened on that day. We had a very dull evening. Lucilla was out of spirits. As for me, I had not yet had time to accustom myself to the shocking spectacle of Oscar's discoloured face. I was serious and silent. You would never have guessed me to be a Frenchwoman, if you had seen me for the first time on the occasion of my return to the rectory.

The next day a small domestic event happened, which must be chronicled in this place.

Our Dimchurch doctor, always dissatisfied with his position in an obscure country place, had obtained an appointment in India which offered great professional advantages to an ambitious man. He called to take leave of us on his departure. I found an opportunity of speaking to him about Oscar. He entirely agreed with me that the attempt to keep the change produced in his former patient by the Nitrate of Silver from Lucilla's knowledge,

was simply absurd. It would come to her ears, he said, before many days were over our heads. With that prediction, addressed to my private ear, he left us. The removal of him from the scene was, you will please to bear in mind, the removal of an important local witness to the medical treatment of Oscar, and was, as such, an incident with a bearing of its own on the future, which claims a place for it in the present narrative.

Two more days passed, and nothing happened. On the morning of the third day, the doctor's prophecy was all but fulfilled, through the medium of the wandering Arab of the family, our funny little Jicks.

While Lucilla and I were strolling about the garden with Oscar, the child suddenly darted out on us from behind a tree, and, seizing Oscar round the legs, hailed him affectionately at the top of her voice as "The Blue Man!" Lucilla instantly stopped, and said, "Who do you call 'The Blue Man'?" Jicks answered boldly, "Oscar." Lucilla caught the child up in her arms. "Why do you call Oscar 'The Blue Man'?" she asked. Jicks pointed to Oscar's face, and then, re-

membering Lucilla's blindness, appealed to me. "You tell her!" said Jicks, in high glee. Oscar seized my hand, and looked at me imploringly. I determined not to interfere. It was bad enough to remain passive, and to let her be kept in the dark. Actively, I was resolved to take no part in deceiving her. Her colour rose; she put Jicks down on the ground. "Are you both dumb?" she asked. "Oscar! I insist on knowing it—how have you got the nick-name of 'The Blue Man'?" Left helpless, Oscar (to my disgust) took refuge in a lie—and, worse still, a clumsy lie. He declared that he had got his nick-name in the nursery, at the time of Lucilla's absence in London, by one day painting his face in the character of Bluebeard to amuse the children! If Lucilla had felt the faintest suspicion of the truth, blind as she was, she must now have discovered it. As things were, Oscar annoyed and irritated her. I could see that it cost her a struggle to suppress something like a feeling of contempt for him. "Amuse the children, the next time, in some other way," she said. "Though I can't see you, still I don't like to hear of your disfiguring your face by

painting it blue." With that answer, she walked away a little by herself, evidently disappointed in her betrothed husband for the first time in her experience of him.

He cast another imploring look at me. "Did you hear what she said about my face?" he whispered.

"You have lost an excellent opportunity of speaking out," I answered. "I believe you will bitterly regret the folly and the cruelty of deceiving her."

He shook his head, with the immovable obstinacy of a weak man.

"Nugent doesn't think as you do," he said, handing me the letter. "Read that bit there —now Lucilla is out of hearing."

I paused for a moment before I could read. The resemblance between the twins extended even to their handwritings! If I had picked Nugent's letter up, I should have handed it to Oscar as a letter of Oscar's own writing.

The paragraph to which he pointed, only contained these lines:—"Your last relieves my anxiety about your health. I entirely agree with you that any personal sacrifice which cures you of those horrible attacks is

a sacrifice wisely made. As to your keeping the change a secret from the young lady, I can only say that I suppose you know best how to act in this emergency. I will abstain from forming any opinion of my own until we meet."

I handed Oscar back the letter.

"There is no very warm approval there of the course you are taking," I said. "The only difference between your brother and me is, that he suspends his opinion, and that I express mine."

"I have no fear of my brother," Oscar answered. "Nugent will feel for me, and understand me, when he comes to Browndown. In the meantime, this shall not happen again."

He stooped over Jicks. The child, while we were talking, had laid herself down luxuriously on the grass, and was singing to herself little snatches of a nursery song. Oscar pulled her up on her legs rather roughly. He was out of temper with her, as well as with himself.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I am going to see Mr. Finch," he an-

wered, "and to have Jicks kept for the uture out of Lucilla's garden."

"Does Mr. Finch approve of your silence?"

"Mr. Finch, Madame Pratolungo, leaves me to decide on a matter which concerns nobody but Lucilla and myself."

After that reply, there was an end of all further remonstrance from me, as a matter of course.

Oscar walked off with his prisoner to the house. Jicks trotted along, by his side, unconscious of the mischief she had done, singing another verse of the nursery song. I rejoined Lucilla, with my mind made up as to the line of conduct I should adopt in the future. If Oscar did succeed in keeping the truth concealed from her, I was positively resolved, come what might of it, to enlighten her before they were married, with my own lips. What! after pledging myself to keep the secret? Yes. Perish the promise which makes me false to a person whom I love! I despise such promises from the bottom of my heart.

Two days more slipped by—and then a telegram found its way to Browndown. Oscar

came running to us, at the rectory, with his news. Nugent had landed at Liverpool. Oscar was to expect him at Dimchurch on the next day.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD.

HE SETS US ALL RIGHT.

I HAVE thus far quite inadvertently omitted to mention one of the prominent virtues of Reverend Finch. He was an accomplished master of that particular form of human persecution which is called reading aloud; and he inflicted his accomplishment on his family circle at every available opportunity. Of what we suffered on these occasions, I shall say nothing. Let it be enough to mention that the rector thoroughly enjoyed the pleasure of hearing his own magnificent voice.

There was no escaping Mr. Finch when the rage for "reading" seized on him. Now on one pretence, and now on another, he descended on us unfortunate women, book in

hand; seated us at one end of the room; placed himself at the other; opened his dreadful mouth; and fired words at us, like shots at a target, by the hour together. Sometimes he gave us poetical readings from Shakespeare or Milton; and sometimes Parliamentary speeches by Burke or Sheridan. Read what he might, he made such a noise and such a fuss over it; he put his own individuality so prominently in the foremost place, and he kept the poets or the orators whom he was supposed to be interpreting so far in the background, that they lost every trace of character of their own, and became one and all perfectly intolerable reflections of Mr. Finch. I date my first unhappy doubts of the supreme excellence of Shakespeare's poetry from the rector's readings; and I attribute to the same exasperating cause my implacable hostility (on every question of the time) to the policy of Mr. Burke.

On the evening when Nugent Dubourg was expected at Browndown—and when we particularly wanted to be left alone to dress ourselves, and to gossip by anticipation about the expected visitor—Mr. Finch was seized

with one of his periodical rages for firing off words at his family, after tea. He selected *Hamlet* as the medium for exhibiting his voice, on this occasion; and he declared, as the principal motive for taking his elocutionary exercise, that the object he especially had in view was the benefit of poor Me!

"My good creature, I accidentally heard you reading to Lucilla, the other day. It was very nice, as far as it went—very nice indeed. But you will allow me—as a person, Madame Pratolungo, possessing considerable practice in the art of reading aloud—to observe that you might be benefited by a hint or two. I will give you a few ideas. (Mrs. Finch! I propose giving Madame Pratolungo a few ideas.) Pay particular attention, if you please, to the Pauses, and to the management of the Voice at the end of the lines. Lucilla, my child, you are interested in this. The perfecting of Madame Pratolungo is a matter of considerable importance to *you*. Don't go away."

Lucilla and I happened, on that evening, to be guests at the rectory table. It was one of the regular occasions on which we left our own side of the house, and joined the family at

(what Mr. Finch called) "the pastor's evening meal." He had got his wife; he had got his eldest daughter; he had got your humble servant. A horrid smile of enjoyment overspread the reverend gentleman's face, as he surveyed us from the opposite end of the room, and opened his vocal fire on his audience of three.

"*Hamlet:* Act the First; Scene the First. Elsinore. A Platform before the Castle. Francisco on his post" (Mr. Finch). "Enter to him Bernardo" (Mr. Finch). "Who's there?" "Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself." (Mrs. Finch unfolds herself—she suckles the baby, and tries to look as if she was having an intellectual treat.) Francisco and Bernardo converse in bass—Boom-boom-boom. "Enter Horatio and Marcellus" (Mr. Finch and Mr. Finch.) "Stand! Who's there?" "Friends to this ground." "And liegemen to the Dane." (Madame Pratolungo begins to feel the elocutionary exposition of Shakespeare, where she always feels it, in her legs. She tries to sit still on her chair. Useless! She is suffering under the malady known to her by bitter experience of Mr. Finch, as the Hamlet-Fidgets.) Bernardo

and Francisco, Horatio and Marcellus, converse—Boom-boom-boom. "Enter Ghost of Hamlet's Father." Mr. Finch makes an awful pause. In the supernatural silence, we can hear the baby sucking. Mrs. Finch enjoys her intellectual treat. Madame Pratolungo fidgets. Lucilla catches the infection, and fidgets too. Marcellus-Finch goes on. "Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio." Bernardo-Finch backs him: "Looks it not like the King? Mark it, Horatio." Lucilla-Finch inserts herself in the dialogue: "Papa, I am very sorry; I have had a nervous headache all day; please excuse me if I take a turn in the garden." The rector makes another awful pause, and glares at his daughter. (Exit Lucilla.) Horatio looks at the Ghost, and takes up the dialogue: "Most like; it harrows me" —Boom-boom-boom. The baby is satiated. Mrs. Finch wants her handkerchief. Madame Pratolungo seizes the opportunity of moving her distracted legs, and finds the handkerchief. Mr. Finch pauses—glares—goes on again—reaches the second scene. "Enter the King, Queen, Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes, Voltimand, Cornelius, and Lords Attendant." All Mr.

Finch! oh, my legs! my legs! all Mr. Finch, and Boom-boom-boom. Third scene. "Enter Laertes and Ophelia." (Both Rectors of Dim-church; both with deep bass voices; both about five feet high, pitted with the small-pox, and adorned round the neck with dingy white cravats.) Mr. Finch goes on and on and on. Mrs. Finch and the baby simultaneously close their eyes in slumber. Madame Pratolungo suffers such tortures of restlessness in her lower limbs, that she longs for a skilled surgeon to take out his knife and deliver her from her own legs. Mr. Finch advances in deeper and deeper bass, in keener and keener enjoyment, to the Fourth Scene. ("Enter Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus.") Mercy! what do I hear? Is relief approaching to us from the world outside? Are there footsteps in the hall? Yes! Mrs. Finch opens her eyes; Mrs. Finch hears the footsteps, and rejoices in them as I do. Reverend Hamlet hears nothing but his own voice. He begins the scene: "The air bites shrewdly. It is very cold." The door opens. The rector feels a gust of air, dramatically appropriate, just at the right moment. He looks round. If it is

a servant, let that domestic person tremble! No—not a servant. Guests—heavens be praised, guests. Welcome, gentlemen—welcome! No more Hamlet, to-night, thanks to You. Enter two Characters who must be instantly attended to:—Mr. Oscar Dubourg; introducing his twin-brother from America, Mr. Nugent Dubourg.

Astonishment at the extraordinary resemblance between them, was the one impression felt by all three of us, as the brothers entered the room.

Exactly alike in their height, in their walk, in their features, and in their voices. Both with the same coloured hair and the same beardless faces. Oscar's smile exactly reflected on Nugent's lips. Oscar's odd little semi-foreign tricks of gesticulation with his hands, exactly reproduced in the hands of Nugent. And, to crown it all, there was the complexion which Oscar had lost for ever (just a shade darker perhaps) found again on Nugent's cheeks! The one difference which made it possible to distinguish between them, at the moment when they first appeared to-

gether in the room, was also the one difference which Lucilla was physically incapable of detecting—the terrible contrast of colour between the brother who bore the blue disfigurement of the drug, and the brother who was left as Nature had made him.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Finch—I have long wished for this pleasure. Thank you, Mr. Finch, for all your kindness to my brother. Madame Pratolungo, I presume? Permit me to shake hands. It is needless to say, I have heard of your illustrious husband. Aha! here's a baby. Yours, Mrs. Finch? Girl or boy, ma'am? A fine child—if a bachelor may be allowed to pronounce an opinion. *Tweet—tweet—tweet!*"

He chirrupped to the baby, as if he had been a family man, and snapped his fingers gaily. Poor Oscar's blue face turned in silent triumph towards me. "What did I tell you?" his look asked. "Did I not say Nugent fascinated everybody at first sight?" Most true. An irresistible man. So utterly different in his manner from Oscar—except when he was in repose—and yet so like Oscar in other respects, I can only describe him as his brother

completed. He had the pleasant lively flow of spirits, the easy winning gentleman-like confidence in himself, which Oscar wanted. And, then, what excellent taste he possessed. He liked children! he respected the memory of my glorious Pratolungo!—In half a minute from the time when he entered the room, Nugent Dubourg had won Mrs. Finch's heart and mine.

He turned from the baby to Mr. Finch, and pointed to the open Shakespeare on the table.

"You were reading to the ladies?" he said. "I am afraid we have interrupted you."

"Don't mention it," said the rector, with his loftiest politeness. "Another time will do. It is a habit of mine, Mr. Nugent, to read aloud in my family circle. As a clergyman and a lover of poetry (in both capacities) I have long cultivated the art of elocution——"

"My dear sir, excuse me, you have cultivated it all wrong!"

Mr. Finch paused, thunderstruck. A man in his presence presuming to have an opinion of his own! a man in the rectory parlour capable of interrupting the rector in the middle of a sentence! guilty of the insane

audacity of telling him, as a reader—with Shakespeare open before them—that he read wrong!

"Oh, we heard you as we came in!" proceeded Nugent, with the most undiminished confidence, expressed in the most gentleman-like manner. "You read it like this." He took up *Hamlet* and read the opening line of the Fourth Scene, ("The air bites shrewdly. It is very cold") with an irresistibly-accurate imitation of Mr. Finch. "That's not the way Hamlet would speak. No man in his position would remark that it was very cold in that bow-wow manner. What is Shakespeare before all things? True to nature; always true to nature. What condition is Hamlet in when he is expecting to see the Ghost? He is nervous, and he feels the cold. Let him show it naturally; let him speak as any other man would speak, under the circumstances. Look here! Quick and quiet—like this. 'The air bites shrewdly'—there Hamlet stops and shivers—pur-rer-rer! 'it is very cold.' That's the way to read Shakespeare!"

Mr. Finch lifted his head into the air as high as it could possibly go, and brought the

flat of his hand down with a solemn and sounding smack on the open book.

"Allow me to say, sir——!" he began.

Nugent stopped him again, more good-humouredly than ever.

"You don't agree with me? All right! Quite useless to dispute about it. I don't know what *you* may be—*I* am the most opinionated man in existence. Sheer waste of time, my dear sir, to attempt convincing Me. Now, just look at that child!" Here Mr. Nugent Dubourg's attention was suddenly attracted by the baby. He twisted round on his heel, and addressed Mrs. Finch. "I take the liberty of saying, ma'am, that a more senseless dress doesn't exist, than the dress that is put, in this country, on infants of tender years. What are the three main functions which that child—that charming child of yours—performs? He sucks; he sleeps; and he grows. At the present moment, he isn't sucking, he isn't sleeping—he is growing with all his might. Under those interesting circumstances, what does he want to do? To move his limbs freely in every direction. You let him swing his arms to his heart's content—

and you deny him freedom to kick his legs. You clothe him in a dress three times as long as himself. He tries to throw his legs up in the air as he throws his arms, and he can't do it. There is his senseless long dress entangling itself in his toes, and making an effort of what Nature intended to be a luxury. Can anything be more absurd? What are mothers about? Why don't they think for themselves? Take my advice—short petticoats, Mrs. Finch. Liberty, glorious liberty, for my young friend's legs! Room, heaps of room, for that infant martyr's toes!"

Mrs. Finch listened helplessly—lifted the baby's long petticoats, and looked at them—stared piteously at Nugent Dubourg—opened her lips to speak—and, thinking better of it, turned her watery eyes on her husband, appealing to *him* to take the matter up. Mr. Finch made another attempt to assert his dignity—a ponderously satirical attempt, this time.

"In offering your advice to my wife, Mr. Nugent," said the rector, "you must permit me to remark that it would have had more practical force if it had been the advice of a married man. I beg to remind you——"

"You beg to remind me that it is the advice of a bachelor? Oh, come! that really won't do at this time of day. Doctor Johnson settled that argument at once and for ever, a century since. 'Sir!' (he said to somebody of your way of thinking) 'you may scold your carpenter, when he has made a bad table, though you can't make a table yourself.' I say to you —'Mr. Finch, you may point out a defect in a baby's petticoats, though you haven't got a baby yourself!' Doesn't that satisfy you? All right! Take another illustration. Look at your room here. I can see in the twinkling of an eye, that it's badly lit. You have only got one window—you ought to have two. Is it necessary to be a practical builder to discover that? Absurd! Are you satisfied now? No! Take another illustration. What's this printed paper, here, on the chimney-piece? Assessed Taxes. Ha! Assessed Taxes will do. You're not in the House of Commons; you're not Chancellor of the Exchequer—but haven't you an opinion of your own about taxation, in spite of that? Must you and I be in Parliament before we can presume to see that the feeble old British Constitution is at its last gasp——?"

"And the vigorous young Republic drawing its first breath of life!" I burst in; introducing the Pratolungo programme (as my way is) at every available opportunity.

Nugent Dubourg instantly wheeled round in my direction; and set *me* right on *my* subject, just as he had set the rector right on reading *Hamlet*, and Mrs. Finch right on clothing babies.

"Not a bit of it!" he pronounced positively. "The 'young Republic' is the ricketty child of the political family. Give him up, ma'am. You will never make a man of him."

I tried to assert myself as the rector had tried before me—with precisely the same result. I appealed indignantly to the authority of my illustrious husband.

"Doctor Pratolungo——" I began.

"Was an honest man," interposed Nugent Dubourg. "I am an advanced Liberal myself—I respect him. But he was quite wrong. All sincere republicans make the same mistake. They believe in the existence of public spirit in Europe. Amiable delusion! Public spirit is dead in Europe. Public spirit is the generous emotion of young nations, of new

peoples. In selfish old Europe, private interest has taken its place. When your husband preached the republic, on what ground did he put it? On the ground that the republic was going to elevate the nation. Pooh! Ask me to accept the republic, on the ground that I elevate Myself—and, supposing you can prove it, I will listen to you. If you are ever to set republican institutions going, in the Old World —*there* is the only motive power that will do it!"

I was indignant at such sentiments. "My glorious husband——" I began again.

"Would have died rather than appeal to the meanest instincts of his fellow-creatures. Just so! There was his mistake. That's why he never could make anything of the republic. That's why the republic is the ricketty child of the political family. *Quod erat demonstrandum*," said Nugent Dubourg, finishing me off with a pleasant smile, and an easy indicative gesture of the hand which said, "Now I have settled these three people in succession, I am equally well satisfied with myself and with them!"

His smile was irresistible. Bent as I was

on disputing the degrading conclusions at which he had arrived, I really had not fire enough in me, at the moment, to feed my own indignation. As to Reverend Finch, he sat silently swelling in a corner; digesting, as he best might, the discovery that there was another man in the world, besides the Rector of Dimchurch, with an excellent opinion of himself, and with perfectly unassailable confidence and fluency in expressing it. In the momentary silence that now followed, Oscar got his first opportunity of speaking. He had, thus far, been quite content to admire his clever brother. He now advanced to me, and asked what had become of Lucilla.

"The servant told me she was here," he said. "I am so anxious to introduce her to Nugent."

Nugent put his arm affectionately round his brother's neck, and gave him a hug. "Dear old boy! I am just as anxious as you are."

"Lucilla went out a little while since," I said, "to take a turn in the garden."

"I'll go and find her," said Oscar. "Wait here, Nugent. I'll bring her in."

He left the room. Before he could close

the door one of the servants appeared, to claim Mrs. Finch's private ear, on some mysterious domestic emergency. Nugent facetiously entreated her, as she passed him, to clear her mind of prejudice, and consider the question of infant petticoats on its own merits. Mr. Finch took offence at this second reference to the subject. He rose to follow his wife.

"When you are a married man, Mr. Dubourg," said the rector severely, "you will learn to leave the management of an infant in its mother's hands."

"There's another mistake!" remarked Nugent, following him, with unabated good-humour, to the door. "A married man's idea of another man as a husband, always begins and ends with his idea of himself." He turned to me, as the door closed on Mr. Finch. "Now we are alone, Madame Pratolungo," he said, "I want to speak to you about Miss Finch. There is an opportunity, before she comes in. Oscar's letter only told me that she was blind. I am naturally interested in everything that relates to my brother's future wife. I am particularly interested about this affliction

of hers. May I ask how long she has been blind?"

"Since she was a year old," I replied.

"Through an accident?"

"No."

"After a fever? or a disease of any other sort?"

I began to feel a little surprised at his entering into these medical details.

"I never heard that it was through a fever, or other illness," I said. "So far as I know, the blindness came on unexpectedly, from some cause that did not express itself to the people about her, at the time."

He drew his chair confidentially nearer to mine. "How old is she?" he asked.

I began to feel more than a little surprised; and I showed it, I suppose, on telling him Lucilla's age.

"As things are now," he explained, "there are reasons which make me hesitate to enter on the question of Miss Finch's blindness either with my brother, or with any members of the family. I must wait to speak about it to *them*, until I can speak to good practical purpose. There is no harm in my starting

the subject with *you*. When she first lost her sight, no means of restoring it were left untried, of course?"

"I should suppose not," I replied. "It's so long since, I have never asked."

"So long since," he repeated—and then considered for a moment.

His reflections ended in a last question.

"She is resigned, I suppose—and everybody about her is resigned—to the idea of her being hopelessly blind for life?"

Instead of answering him, I put a question on my side. My heart was beginning to beat rapidly—without my knowing why.

"Mr. Nugent Dubourg," I said, "what have you got in your mind about Lucilla?"

"Madame Pratolungo," he replied, "I have got something in my mind which was put into it by a friend of mine whom I met in America."

"The friend you mentioned in your letter to your brother?"

"The same."

"The German gentleman whom you propose to introduce to Oscar and Lucilla?"

"Yes."

"May I ask who he is?"

Nugent Dubourg looked at me attentively; considered with himself for the second time; and answered in these words:

"He is the greatest living authority, and the greatest living operator, in diseases of the eye."

The idea in his mind burst its way into my mind in a moment.

"Gracious God!" I exclaimed, "are you mad enough to suppose that Lucilla's sight can be restored, after a blindness of one-and-twenty years?"

He suddenly held up his hand, in sign to me to be silent.

At the same moment, the door opened; and Lucilla (followed by Oscar), entered the room.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH.

HE SEES LUCILLA.

THE first impression which poor Miss Finch produced on Nugent Dubourg, was precisely the same as the first impression which she had produced on me.

"Good Heavens!" he cried. "The Dresden Madonna! The Virgin of San Sisto!"

Lucilla had already heard from me of her extraordinary resemblance to the chief figure in Raphael's renowned picture. Nugent's blunt outburst of recognition passed unnoticed by her. She stopped short, in the middle of the room—startled, the instant he spoke, by the extraordinary similarity of his tone and accent to the tone and accent of his brother's voice.

"Oscar," she asked nervously, "are you behind me? or in front of me?" Oscar laughed, and answered "Here!"—speaking behind her. She turned her head towards the place in front of her, from which Nugent had spoken. "Your voice is wonderfully like Oscar's," she said, addressing him timidly. "Is your face exactly like his face, too? May I judge for myself of the likeness between you? I can only do it in one way—by my touch."

Oscar advanced, and placed a chair for his brother by Lucilla's side.

"She has eyes in the tips of her fingers," he said. "Sit down, Nugent, and let her pass her hand over your face."

Nugent obeyed him in silence. Now that the first impression of surprise had passed away, I observed that a marked change was beginning to assert itself in his manner.

Little by little, an unnatural constraint got possession of him. His fluent tongue found nothing to talk about. His easy movements altered in the strangest way, until they almost became the movements of a slow awkward man. He was more like his brother than ever, as he sat down in the chair to submit

himself to Lucilla's investigation. She had produced, at first sight—as well as I could judge—some impression on him for which he had not been prepared; causing some mental disturbance in him which he was for the moment quite unable to control. His eyes looked up at her, spell-bound; his colour came and went; his breath quickened audibly when her fingers touched his face.

"What's the matter?" said Oscar, looking at him in surprise.

"Nothing is the matter," he answered, in the low absent tone of a man whose mind was secretly pursuing its own train of thought.

Oscar said no more. Once, twice, three times, Lucilla's hand passed slowly over Nugent's face. He submitted to it, silently, gravely, immovably—a perfect contrast to the talkative, lively young man of half an hour since. Lucilla employed a much longer time in examining him than she had occupied in examining me.

While the investigation was proceeding, I had leisure to rethink again over what had passed between Nugent and me on the subject of Lucilla's blindness, before she entered.

the room. My mind had by this time recovered its balance. I was able to ask myself what this young fellow's daring idea was really worth. Was it within the range of possibility that a sense so delicate as the sense of sight, lost for one-and-twenty years, could be restored by any means short of a miracle? It was monstrous to suppose it: the thing could not be. If there had been the faintest chance of giving my poor dear back the blessing of sight, that chance would have been tried by competent persons years and years since. I was ashamed of myself for having been violently excited at the moment by the new thought which Nugent had started in my mind; I was honestly indignant at his uselessly disturbing me with the vainest of all vain hopes. The one wise thing to do in the future, was to caution this flighty and inconsequent young man to keep his mad notion about Lucilla to himself—and to dismiss it from my own thoughts, at once and for ever.

Just as I arrived at that sensible resolution, I was recalled to what was going on in the room, by Lucilla's voice, addressing me by my name.

"The likeness is wonderful," she said. "Still, I think I can find a difference between them."

(The only difference between them was in the contrast of complexion and in the contrast of manner—both these being dissimilarities which appealed more or less directly to the eye).

"What difference do you find?" I asked.

She slowly came towards me, with an anxious perplexed face; pondering as she advanced.

"I can't explain it," she answered—after a long silence.

When Lucilla left him, Nugent rose from his chair. He abruptly—almost roughly—took his brother's hand. He spoke to his brother in a strangely excited, feverish, headlong way.

"My dear fellow, now I have seen her, I congratulate you more heartily than ever. She is charming; she is unique. Oscar! I could almost envy you, if you were anyone else!"

Oscar was radiant with delight. His brother's opinion ranked above all human

opinions in his estimation. Before he could say a word in return, Nugent left him as abruptly as he had approached him; walking away by himself to the window—and standing there, looking out.

Lucilla had not heard him. She was still pondering, with the same perplexed face. The likeness between the twins was apparently weighing on her mind—an unsolved problem that vexed and irritated it. Without anything said by me to lead to resuming the subject, she returned obstinately to the assertion that she had just made.

"I tell you again I am sensible of a difference between them," she repeated—"though you don't seem to believe me."

I interpreted this uneasy reiteration as meaning that she was rather trying to convince herself than to convince me. In her blind condition, it was doubly and trebly embarrassing not to know one brother from the other. I understood her unwillingness to [illegible] this. I felt (in her position) how it would have irritated *me*. She was waiting—impatiently waiting—for me to say something on my side. I am, as you know

already, an indiscreet woman. I innocently said one of my rash things.

"I believe whatever you tell me, my dear," I answered. "You can find out a difference between them, I have no doubt. Still, I own I should like to see it put to the proof."

Her colour rose. "How?" she asked abruptly.

"Try your touch alternately on both their faces," I suggested, "without knowing beforehand which position they each of them occupy. Make three trials—leaving them to change their places or not, between each trial, just as they please. If you guess which is which correctly three times following, there will be the proof that you can really lay your hand on a difference between them."

Lucilla shrank from accepting the challenge. She drew back a step, and silently shook her head. Nugent, who had overheard me, turned round suddenly from the window, and supported my proposal.

"A capital notion!" he burst out. "Let's try it! You don't object, Oscar—do you?"

"I object?" cried Oscar—amazed at the bare idea of his opposing any assertion of his

will to the assertion of his brother's will. "If Lucilla is willing, I say Yes, with all my heart."

The two brothers approached us, arm in arm. Lucilla, very reluctantly, allowed herself to be persuaded into trying the experiment. Two chairs, exactly alike, were placed in front of her. At a sign from Nugent, Oscar silently took the chair on her right. By this arrangement, the hand which she had used in touching Nugent's face, would be now the hand that she would employ in touching Oscar's face. When they were both seated, I announced that we were ready. Lucilla placed her hands on their faces, right and left, without the faintest idea in her mind of the positions which the two relatively occupied.

After first touching them with both hands, and both together, she tried them separately next, beginning with Oscar, and using her right hand only. She left him for Nugent; again using her right hand—then came back to him again—then returned to Nugent—hesitated—decided—tapped Nugent lightly on the head.

"Oscar!" she said.

Nugent burst out laughing. The laugh told her, before any of us could speak, that she had made a mistake at the first attempt.

"Try again, Lucilla," said Oscar kindly.

"Never!" she answered, angrily stepping back from both of them. "One mystification is enough."

Nugent tried next to persuade her to renew the experiment. She checked him angrily at the first word.

"Do you think if I won't do it for Oscar," she said, "that I would do it for you? You laughed at me. What was there to laugh at? Your brother's features are your features; your brother's hair is your hair; your brother's height is your height. What is there so very ridiculous—with such a resemblance as that—in a poor blind girl like me, mistaking you one for the other? I wish to preserve a good opinion of you, for Oscar's sake. Don't turn me into ridicule again—or I shall be forced to think that your brother's good heart is not yours also!"

Nugent and Oscar looked at each other,

petrified by this sudden outbreak; Nugent of the two, being the most completely whelmed by it.

I attempted to interfere and put things right. My easy philosophy and my volatile French nature, failed to see any adequate cause for this vehement exhibition of resentment on Lucilla's part. Something in my tone, as I suppose, only added to her irritation. I, in my turn, was checked sternly at the first word. "You proposed it," she said; "You are the most to blame." I hastened to make my apologies (inwardly remarking that the habit of raising a storm in a tea-cup is a growing habit with the rising generation in England). Nugent followed me with more apologies, on his side. Oscar supported us with his superior influence. He took Lucilla's hand, kissed it—and whispered something in her ear. The kiss and the whisper acted like a charm. She held out her hand to Nugent, she put her arm round my neck and embraced me, with all her own grace and sweetness. "Forgive me," she said to us gently. "I wish I could learn to be patient. But, oh, Mr. Nugent, it is sometimes *so* hard to be

blin[illegible]" I can repeat the words; but I can [illegible]no idea of the touching simplicity with [illegible]h they were spoken—of her innocently earnest anxiety to win her pardon. She so affected Nugent that he too—after a look at Oscar which said, "May I?"—kissed the hand that she offered to him. As his lips touched her, she started. The bright flush which always indicated the sudden rising of a thought in her mind, flew over her face. She unconsciously held Nugent's hand in her own, absorbed in the interest of realising the new thought. For a moment, she stood, still as a statue, consulting with herself. The moment passed, she dropped Nugent's hand, and turned brightly to me.

"Will you think me very obstinate?" she asked.

"Why, my love?"

"I am not satisfied yet. I want to try again."

"No! no! At any rate, not to-day."

"I want to try again," she repeated. "Not in your way. In a wa[illegible]y own that has just come into [illegible]y he[illegible]. She turned to Oscar. "Will you humour me in this?" It

is needless to set down Oscar's reply. She turned to Nugent. "Will you?"

"Only say what you wish me to do," he answered.

"Go with your brother," she said, "to the other end of the room. I know where you are each of you standing, at this end. Madame Pratolungo will lead me to the place, and will put me just within reach of both your hands. I want each of you in turn (arrange by a sign between yourselves which is to begin) to take my hand, and hold it for a moment, and then drop it. I have an idea that I can distinguish between you, in that way—and I want very much to try it."

The brothers went silently to the other end of the room. I led Lucilla, after them, to the place in which they stood. At my suggestion, Nugent was the first to take her hand, as she had requested; to hold it for a moment; and then to drop it.

"Nugent!" she said, without the slightest hesitation.

"Quite right," I answered.

She laughed gaily. "Go on! Puzzle me if you possibly can."

The brothers noiselessly changed places. took her hand, standing exactly where ent had stood.

"Oscar!" she said.

"Right again," I told her.

At a sign from Nugent, Oscar took her hand for the second time. She repeated his name. At a sign from me, the brothers noiselessly placed themselves, one on either side of her—Oscar on the left; Nugent on the right. I gave them the signal; and they each took one of her hands at the same moment. This time, she waited a little longer before she spoke. When she did speak she was right once more. She turned smiling towards the left side, pointed to him as he stood by her, and said, "Oscar."

We were all three equally surprised. I examined Oscar's hand and Nugent's hand alternately. Except the fatal difference in the colour, they were, to all intents and purposes, the same hands—the same size, the same shape, the same texture of skin; no scar or mark on the hand of one to distinguish it from the hand of the other. By what mysterious

process of divination had she succeeded in discovering which was which?

She was unwilling, or unable, to reply to that question plainly.

"Something in me answers to one of them and not to the other," she said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know. It answers to Oscar. It doesn't answer to Nugent—that's all."

She stopped any further inquiries by proposing that we should finish the evening with some music, in her own sitting-room, on the other side of the house. When we were seated together at the piano—with the twin-brothers established as our audience at the other end of the room—she whispered in my ear:

"I'll tell you!"

"Tell me what?"

"How I know which is which, when they both of them take my hand. When Oscar takes it, a delicious tingle runs from his hand into mine, and steals all over me. I can't describe it any better than that."

"I understand. And when Nugent takes your hand, what do you feel?"

"thing!"

nd that is how you found out the dif-e between them down-stairs?"

"That is how I shall always find out the difference between them. If Oscar's brother ever attempts to play tricks upon my blindness (he is quite capable of it—he laughed at my blindness!), that is how I shall find him out. I told you before I saw him that I hated him. I hate him still!"

"My dear Lucilla!"

"I hate him still!"

She struck the first chords on the piano, with an obstinate frown on her pretty brow. Our little eve[illegible]certo began.

THE END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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